



Relationship & Real Presence
Easter 5: May 14 2017
Revd Jenny Wilkens
Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

I wonder if you have been following the story about actor Stephen Fry who was being investigated by Irish police over whether he could be charged for blasphemy after a particularly eloquent tirade against God in an interview. It was typical of classic arguments used against God along the lines of how can God allow suffering in the world, the question of theodicy. I note that charges against Fry have been dropped, as police failed to find 'enough outraged people' to proceed! I for one am glad about that, as blasphemy laws have not only been used to impede freedom of thought and speech, but more sinisterly, are being used by some countries in our world currently to impede freedom of religion, including freedom for Christians to own and express their beliefs publicly. Be that as it may, Stephen Fry's words are worth pondering because I think they remind us of how often questions about faith and belief arise when people are facing deeply disturbing and personal issues of suffering and death, their own or others'.

Today's gospel takes us back to Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, gathered the night before Jesus' death, which he has already foreshadowed to them, as well as signalling his betrayal and denial by those closest to him. Not unnaturally, the disciples are full of anxiety and foreboding, for Jesus' future and for their own. Jesus is trying to prepare them for what lies ahead, his leaving them, and to reassure them: 'do not let your hearts be troubled' and yet they are very troubled. They are trying to make sense of what is happening, when everything seems to be spiralling down into disaster. And their hearts are full of questions: what is happening? Why is it all going wrong? Where is God in all this?

When Jesus says, "you know the way to the place where I am going," Thomas comes back at him bluntly, "Lord, we do *not* know where you are going, how *can* we know the way?" And when Jesus answers that he is the way and that anyone who knows him will know the Father, Philip also can't contain himself any longer and asks for something that no pious Jew

would dare ask for, to see God face to face: “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”.

It’s like they are wanting answers to all the where, how, what, why questions, they want easy answers of one syllable. Jesus *is* answering them in words of one syllable but they are words of such depth that they cannot grasp what he means.

So Jesus offers just one word – himself, the Word made flesh. Listen to the promises he makes to them: ‘believe *in me*, I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself; where I am, you will be also; I am the way, the truth and the life’.

And do you hear all the words of relationship: ‘if you *know* me, you will *know* my Father also; I have *been with you* all this time; I am in the Father and the Father is in me; the Father *dwells* in me’. Jesus uses a whole raft of words around the Greek word *meno* to dwell, remain, be present with. Even when they cannot understand what is happening, Jesus calls them to rely on the one they have come to know and come to trust, the one who loves them and has shown them God’s love. He calls them to rely on that trust and relationship into an unknown future.

In our life and faith, as individuals and as a community journeying together, we too may have many unanswered questions but whatever our questions, whatever our doubts, whatever the unknowns, yet Jesus still offers himself to us as the Word for us, the way, the truth, and the life for us. Sometimes we want answers, but perhaps Jesus knows that what we really need is relationship, the assurance of God’s love and care and presence, the invitation to dwell ever deeper in the love of God, in the community of love that is the Trinity.

John’s gospel has the infant church find its beginnings at the intersection of two movements – the ascension of the risen Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit¹. Indeed we know that John’s gospel chapter 20 has all these happening on the first Easter day: Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, Jesus’ breathing forth the Holy Spirit, the infant church being born.

But it’s like the church lives at that intersection trying to hold things together: Jesus having to go away - in order that the Spirit might come; Christ now risen and ascended in glory, while we the church try to be the body of Christ here, with the high calling of demonstrating the love of Christ to the world.

¹ Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove*, London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1939, 1.

Our readings from the book of Acts and 1 Peter express that paradox too. In 1 Peter the church is described in highly exalted terms: 'a spiritual house, a holy and royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people' but we are all too aware of how often we are like Peter's other image 'newborn infants', only conscious of our own needs and desires. C S Lewis spoke of the church triumphant like this: "spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners" but then talked about a new Christian who "when he gets to his pew and looks around, sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided"².

The church has always lived with that tension of being on the one hand a spiritual house, the temple of the Holy Spirit, a solid stable institution with structures and rules and bishops and vestries, and on the other an organic body of Christ, animated and enthused by the dynamic wind of the Spirit, sent out into mission to a needy world, called to bring renewal and hope. St Benedict talked about the call to *stability* and the call to *continuous conversion*. If we put *stability* and *continuous conversion* as the two ends of a spectrum, we'd probably all find ourselves at different places, where we feel most comfortable or where we enjoy being.

That is the challenge isn't it, of being called together as living stones. We know well in our rebuilding city that it's easier to throw stones than to build with them. And yet God is in the building business: 'like living stones, *let yourselves be built* into a spiritual house' with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. It's not easy to let yourselves be built, in it, we tend to get our edges knocked off as we rub against each other. We disappoint each other and hurt each other. I for one am glad that our 1 Peter reading ends with 'now you have received mercy' – just as in each service, we say "Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy", we are sorry we have hurt you and one another, help us now to begin again, to show forth the infinite love of God through our finite fragile humanity.

The disciples came to Jesus with their questions: he offered relationship. I came across a lovely description of the eucharist as relationship which you might like to reflect on as we come to eucharist together: 'It is *really God* who is *really present* for us *as we really are* in a way we can *really receive*³'. May it be so for us today, Amen.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Centenary Press, 1942), 15-16.

³ David Lose, *Jesus' Real Presence*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/05/easter-5-a-jesus-real-presence/>