

## Sermon – Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019 – 9.30 am

I wonder how you feel hearing other people's stories of faith. There is evidence to suggest that it is often a great encouragement to us when other people share their story. I imagine there is something about context and appropriateness. Perhaps, too, the language that is used can be either helpful or a hindrance. I was at a clergy study morning last Tuesday which was about confidence in sharing our faith. I was very struck by an observation from one of the participants. He had got together a group of working people from within his congregation, hoping that their fellowship would help them to grow in faith. Initially he would ask them where they had seen God at work during their week. It was a question that tended to meet with silence, confusion and awkwardness. So he changed the approach, asking people to share good news from their week. This approach enabled everyone to join in and led to some fruitful discussions. There's something interesting about the way that simply sharing some good news feels a whole lot easier than searching for God's precise whereabouts in the middle of it.

You will have noticed that in this Easter season, the lectionary invites us to hear many readings from the Acts of the Apostles. It's a wonderful book, very readable, with some romping good stories. For the most part, it is also full of excitement as people filled with faith, hope and love seek to share those things with others. It is important to remember, though, that it is not a book of constant certainty and success. In this morning's reading, Paul and his companions travel to Macedonia, because Paul had a vision which they all believed to be a call from God to proclaim the good news in that place. It proves to be a fruitful trip, meeting with Lydia and baptising her household, as well as staying with her to build one another up in the faith. But this reading comes directly after a series of failures, reminding us that even – perhaps especially – for those early followers of the way, discerning God's will was not an exact science. There were great encouragements, but there were also challenges and failures along the way.

It seems to me that Jesus was under no illusion but that the life of faith is not an easy one. This morning's gospel reading comes from that section of John's gospel known as the farewell discourses. It really is quite beautiful, as Jesus gently seeks to help his disciples to understand what is about to happen. If you read John's gospel in full, one of its characteristic features is a change of pace. After the opening prologue, and up until the end of chapter twelve, the gospel tells stories from Jesus's ministry. The next seven chapters, a full third of the gospel, covers Jesus's final night with the disciples, his Passion and resurrection. It is as though, having been watching a film at a normal pace, it suddenly enters slow motion so that every detail can be absorbed.

Here, on the final night of his life, Jesus gently reminds his disciples what is going to happen to him, and patiently answers their questions. And the questions keep on coming, first from Thomas, then Philip, and this morning's reading is the response to a question from Judas (not Iscariot). What Jesus is trying to explain isn't easy to make sense of, and each answer seems to raise more questions.

I wonder if that sounds familiar. I wonder if you can relate to the disciples as they grapple to make sense of what they are to understand and believe. I wonder, too, if you have ever found yourself in a place where the more someone explains, the less you feel like you understand.

The thing is, this part of the church year is exciting and compelling, but it isn't without its challenges. Having endured the season of Lent and come through Holy Week to the joy of Easter morning, and Jesus's resurrection, we now have to tackle some strange realities. The resurrection brought Jesus

back in bodily form, so that he could once again spend time with his disciples. But Jesus's time on earth was not to last forever. And so, on Thursday, we celebrate Ascension Day, recognising that although Jesus lived on earth following the resurrection, he is no longer physically present. He has ascended to be with the Father. And ten days after Ascension Day, we celebrate Pentecost, recognising that although Jesus is no longer physically present, we have the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the comforter, instead.

It's not really surprising that when before his death Jesus tried to explain to his disciples what would happen, he had a tough time. It's not an easy sell. First they had to accept that he was going to die, that they would lose their friend, teacher and inspiration. Then they were told that although he would return, it would not be forever. And somehow that was good news, because they would have the Holy Spirit instead. I can see why the disciples had questions.

At the end of this morning's gospel reading, Jesus says: "And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." I love that sentence because it simultaneously reveals so much about us, and so much about God. It reveals a lot about us because when we read it – especially having heard all of the disciples' questions up to this point – we might find ourselves thinking, "What?! Really?!" In the moment of reading it we simply might not grasp how the things Jesus has said are going to help us to believe.

And that is why it also reveals so much about God. About God's love, endurance and faithfulness. Jesus believes that what he has said really will help. That having explained something, when the disciples experience it, it will somehow make sense. Jesus knows the nature of faith and he knows the nature of God. He knows that our own doubts and questions are not a threat to God. And he knows that God remains faithful even when we find it hard to – and that God's faithfulness will bring us back to faith, too.

This morning's gospel reading is Jesus's response to the following question: "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" In it, Jesus tells us how it is that we can know God. It's an extraordinary passage, at once deceptively straightforward, yet painfully challenging. And it speaks directly into our own situation as followers of Jesus, who do not have him with us physically.

Our answer is that we know Jesus by loving him and keeping his word. In doing those things, God will come to dwell in us, to be a part of our lives from the inside. And we will be reminded of Jesus's teachings by the Holy Spirit.

If you're anything like me, that's not a bad description of what faith feels like. That sense that there is something more to life. That there is something beyond. That there is a force of love so strong that it needs to be taken seriously. A sense, too, that when we take the time to read our scriptures, to pray, to spend time sharing our stories with fellow travellers, somehow that sense of God's presence in our life grows.

There are times when we might wish that we could speak with the apparent certainty of a St. Paul – that conviction that the path we are following is always the one set before us by God. But in the words of this morning's gospel, we are reminded that Jesus himself knew that the way we know him when we can't see him is through faith. At the heart of our faith is the faithfulness of God, which inspires us to believe and to act. Often it's not easy – just listen to the number of questions that the

disciples had. But faith is a lifelong journey, not a destination, and it's one we live out daily in our acts of service and love.

Amen