

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 10th May 2020
5th Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

Acts 7:55-end

But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

John 14:1-14

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Sermon

I wonder if you remember all those weeks ago, when we were still able to worship in church, and the first decisions we had to face were whether to share the peace by shaking hands, and whether to receive communion in two kinds, both bread and wine, or in one kind, just the bread? It seems like such a long time ago now – almost a world away. In clergy circles, as you can probably imagine, there was hot debate especially about communion, with some clergy opting for communion in one kind only before it became the instruction from our Archbishops. In the conversations and debates, it was interesting how often a position was defended as being the most loving response to the situation. Those who continued to offer communion in both kinds did so out of love; those who offered the bread only did so out of love.

It's hardly surprising that arguments among clerics – and indeed arguments among Christians – are defended on the basis of love. Given that we work from the foundation that God is love, it's really the equivalent of asking the question "what would Jesus do?" Since we believe Jesus is what it looks like to be perfectly loving, asking what he would do should give us the perfectly loving response.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that similar debates continue since the closing of our church buildings. While some people are angry and frustrated that Church of England clergy are not currently allowed to enter the churches for private prayer or worship, others are content to conduct worship from their own homes. Arguments recognise, on the one hand, that some people would find great comfort in knowing that the church building still offered a beating pulse of prayer in the local area, as well as the possibility of seeing the building through recorded services; and on the other that the decision was made to ensure that the church set an example of staying at home at a time when this formed a key element of government advice. While there is little doubt that some people miss the church buildings terribly, it is also true to say that some people will have found their understanding of church and worship transformed by more domestic settings. And many others simply make the best of the situation as it is.

So which is right? Which is the most loving response? What would Jesus do?

This morning's gospel reading is perhaps the ultimate expression of "what would Jesus do?" It includes that extraordinary statement of Jesus that he is the way, and the truth and the life. If we were ever in any doubt, here Jesus makes it perfectly clear that the way to God comes through following him.

And yet the great challenge of deciding what Jesus would do in any given situation lies in the evidence that we have to hand. The gospels tell us a great deal about what Jesus did in the three years of his ministry. But he was a man living in first century Palestine. Turning to the page that describes Jesus's response to a global pandemic isn't possible. And while sickness was a feature of the society in which Jesus lived, our levels of medical and scientific knowledge are very different from Jesus's time.

Which is, perhaps, why we might fall back on asking ourselves what is the most loving response. But that doesn't necessarily offer the easy answers we might hope for, either. As is so often the case, my mother could have told me that. As many of you know, I am one of three children, and she would often say that she couldn't show her love for each of us in the same way because we are such different people. My particular favourite was when she said it was worth giving my brother his own

way because he appreciated it, whereas it was never worthwhile with me because I just felt guilty. Frustrating though it is to admit, she was right. Loving people doesn't mean that we treat them the same. If we want a simplistic answer to the question "what would Jesus do?" it looks like we are going to be disappointed.

Let's return for a moment to the gospel reading itself. A bit of context will be helpful. Of the four gospels, John's gospel is the least like the others. It was written last, and while there are distinct similarities between Mark, Matthew and Luke, John stands alone. It changes the order of some events, notably Jesus turning over the moneylenders' tables in the temple, and it includes stories that are not to be found in any of the other gospels, including the Wedding at Cana, and Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The style in which John's gospel is written presents Jesus as fully aware of his divinity. The "I am" statements are only to be found in John's gospel. John presents Jesus as fully aware of his identity and destiny.

The structure of John's gospel is also unique. The first twelve chapters are devoted to various "signs" identifying who Jesus is and showing what he does. Three years of ministry are described and explained in those chapters. And then it is like we hit the brakes. The Last Supper begins in chapter 13, and thus begins a period of teaching sometimes referred to as the Farewell Discourse, a series of chapters in which Jesus addresses his disciples. This morning's gospel reading forms a part of that discourse.

Just think for a moment about the situation. Jesus knew what was going to happen to him, and he wanted his disciples to be able to continue without him. He wanted them to remain faithful followers, to continue to share God's love, to be that love in the world.

And what Jesus was doing for those first disciples, he continues to do for us today, offering words of comfort and encouragement to help us in our discipleship. When Jesus says that he is the way and the truth and the life, he knows that doesn't offer us a specific answer to what we should do in any given situation. But what he does offer is guidance and an ongoing relationship as we seek to find out the answer for ourselves. Remember that structure of John's gospel? Twelve chapters of action, followed by four chapters simply at the Last Supper. Knowing what it means to give the loving response; knowing the answer to the question "what would Jesus do?" isn't straightforward. We are called to act; and we are also called to reflect. To ask questions of ourselves and one another.

These last weeks have put the brakes on so many aspects of our lives, and for some people that will have enabled them to reflect more deeply, while others will have found reflection impossible. Yet all of us have seen and been involved in all kinds of loving responses, from clapping on a Thursday evening, to baking cakes for neighbours; keeping in touch with neighbours to volunteering to support the national effort.

When Jesus tells us that he is the way and the truth and the life, he doesn't think that he makes our lives easy. But he reminds us of our focus, and he guarantees his presence in our lives. Our paths often feel faltering and we surely make mistakes along the way. But perhaps this is a time when we might above all be forgiving of ourselves and one another. And continue in our efforts to place the way, the truth and the life at the very heart of all we are; and of all we say and do.

Amen