Don’t let your hearts be troubled

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Easter 5A *Comfort and inclusion- Acts 7 55-60, John 14 1-14*

There are two moments in today’s Gospel I want to reflect on today. The first is where Jesus says; *don’t let your hearts be troubled.* At our saddest times, we believe these are the words we need to hear. So this gospel passage is often heard at funerals. But what about a time of crisis? *Don’t let your hearts be troubled.* What!? We can’t just sit around and let the crisis overwhelm us!

Today we saw the crisis of persecution take Stephen the first Christian martyr; him and so many since. There are hundreds of thousands of Christians being harassed and killed right now. For these, you’d imagine *don’t let your hearts be troubled* might be a bit hard to swallow. Yet for many it’s still a comfort.

Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Faith to withstand persecution demands extraordinary courage and conviction. Remember how Stephen stuck to the deepest values of Jesus’ way of living and dying as he was being murdered. He echoed words from the Cross; *Lord, don’t hold this sin against them.* Our faith is rarely likely to be tested in this way – how might we react? Would we let our hearts be troubled?

Stephen was killed because of a fiery sermon he’d preached, challenging the religious authorities. What do we think of him? Was he a saint or a religious fanatic to die like that? Those equipped to say are people who’ve known persecution for *their* faith. Do we have a faith we’d be prepared to die for?

Our distance from the life and death implications of our faith

sees many of us *troubled* by strong religious claims. Our discomfort isn't helped by news of fanatics of all creeds who do dreadful things to other people in the name of their faiths and ours.

We live in a community where people are free to speak out against any and every faith. Unlike many of the world's people, when we come to the scriptures, most of us do so from a long experience of religious freedom. And that makes it hard for us to hear what most others might hear in the scriptures.

I'm stressing this because of the second moment in John 14 I want to reflect on. It's where we hear Jesus say; *I am the way and truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* We hear these words a world away from their setting in the gospel. We hear them in a time and in a country where there's religious freedom – where we have choices to believe or not; freedom to dwell on such impractical questions instead of where the next meal might come from. Yet even here in our free society, these words may be brandished as a threat by people who say that those who haven't proclaimed Jesus as their Lord and Saviour are lost forever. These people turn Jesus' words into a threat.

But as we know, Jesus said these words to the disciples as they first struggled with the idea that he wouldn't be with them for much longer. Thomas – him again – *Lord, we don't know where you're going. How* can *we know the way? Jesus said to him,* **I** *am the way…* You know me; you'll be fine. These weren't words of threat or exclusion, but words of comfort; of embrace. They were a simple statement of fact; Jesus is the way God has provided for the world to know God, and Jesus *has* come for us, and he *will* come again … for *us*.

The way to be with God isn't earned through *our* actions but through *God's* action; the gift of God in Jesus. We can't reach God in our own strength. But in Jesus God reaches out to us; reaches out across time, across culture, across barriers we

believe are impassable to draw us to God. God's grace in Jesus reaches out further than we can imagine; *I go and prepare a place for you … I'll come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.*

Firebrand preachers might say Jesus is drawing a line in the sand to exclude unbelieving people. And occasionally that can be a useful word for an obdurately destructive person to hear. But in Scripture, we can also witness Jesus bending that line in the sand into a circle; a larger and larger circle which is meant to embrace the whole world. Edwin Markham wrote, "[They] drew a circle that shut me out – Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took [them] In!"

Part of what's comforting about John 14 is that even amongst Jesus' closest friends, we find blindness and doubt. Judas has just run off to betray Jesus; Peter's been blustering; overconfident; Thomas can't imagine where Jesus might be leading them; Philip hasn't recognised who Jesus truly is. But Jesus is not put off. *He* started the friendship with them, and *he's* sticking by them/us.

I am the way, and truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Of course not. But that's not because Jesus rejects anyone – Jesus is God reaching out to the world. These are words of embrace – of inclusion. We struggle to see how Jesus does this. With our value system of everything having to be earned, we can't really grasp such grace. We need to remember, that Jesus said, '*God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*.' Jn 3.**17**

We're all embraced here – invited; included. God's intention is that the world be might be saved; not condemned. So our proclamation can be guided by what we've heard today. We are to comfort a troubled world with his words of hope, and we are to be loyal and patient like Jesus – *I will come for you so*

that where I am, you may be also; I am the way, the truth and the life.

Praise him for his love, his grace and favour! Amen

Love III – George Herbert

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back

Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:

Love said, ‘You shall be he’.

‘I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee’.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

‘Who made the eyes but I’?

‘Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve’.

‘And know you not’, says Love, ‘who bore the blame’?

‘My dear, then I will serve’.

‘You must sit down’, says Love, ‘and taste my meat’:

So I did sit and eat.

Prince Emeth, life-long worshipper of the Calormenes’ god Tash talks of his first meeting with the great Lion Aslan, the Christ figure of the Narnia stories.

[Aslan] bent down his golden head and touched my forehead with his tongue and said, *Son, thou art welcome*.

But I said, *Alas, Lord, I am no son of Thine but the servant of Tash*.

He answered, *Child, all the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me*. … *I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him*.

From *The Last Battle* by CS Lewis [the beginning of Ch 15 ‘Further up and further in’]

Not everybody has a sense of a destination or a path in life; it’s actually a privilege to have that. The path that Jesus is talking about isn’t one that is laid out as though we have no choice in the matter. The path that Jesus ***is***, is a relationship – and it’s a relationship that assures us that no matter how the path twists and winds, it leads us to a loving

home in the end. [VSB]