

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 10th May 2020

Acts 7.55-60; 1 Peter 2.2-10; John 14.1-14

Our readings today address the theme of our fear of death. In the reading from the book of Acts, Stephen fearlessly accepts his martyrdom confident of his home in heaven. The letter of Peter underlines how special to God we are, how central to his purposes are those who have accepted to the call to follow Jesus. And in the Gospel of John, Jesus assures his disciples of their warm welcome in heaven. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Since Easter Day, we have heard how Jesus was still with his disciples, in their meetings, and in their journeys, as indeed he continues to be today through the Holy Spirit. We have heard how Jesus continues to lead his followers day by day like a good shepherd, between places of safety and adventure, in finding the new life of the Kingdom of God. And today, we hear about the welcome that awaits us in heaven. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

The present situation with the coronavirus has heightened everyone's fear of death, a fear that that has been magnified by the unfamiliar experience of a mass illness that is still only poorly understood, with a bemusingly wide range of symptoms and effects on different people. We are not used to this. We have come to expect the comfort of magisterial medical knowledge. No one knows quite how the virus will affect them if they get it. And into this, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

Our society generally does seem to be less reconciled to the inevitability of death than previous generations. In the words of the poet Dylan Thomas, we rage against the dying of the light. I wonder how much this has to do with the decline of confident religious faith. Rather than religion being, in the words of the noted biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins a kind of virus infecting humankind, maybe human religion is actually an essential coping strategy for many self-conscious beings. A strategy which enables many people still to function well even in the face of death.

Of course you have to believe it, to believe genuinely in the hope of heaven, and this is what Jesus teaches his followers to do. But rather than building a detailed picture of what heaven is and what it will be like, he simply exhorts his disciples to believe in God and to believe in himself. There is our security. Jesus is our hope. Jesus himself is the way to heaven, the truth about heaven, and reveals the life of heaven. We need look no further. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Heaven is about being with Jesus, closer to the love of God, and closer to the love of those who have gone before us. That's it; that's all you need to know. Oh, except you need to be in training for it, otherwise you might not like it; I think heaven will be quite tough for the hard-hearted. For the training manual, just read the Beatitudes, Matthew chapter 5, verse 3 to 10. Those who will easily be ready for heaven are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the others too. To these people in particular, the people of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

ST MARY-LE-TOWER CHURCH IPSWICH

But how does the hope of heaven help us cope with the loss of love? Arguably, it's not so much the fear our own death that really bothers us, but the traumatic experience of bereavement. In the current crisis, it is the disruptions to the usual processes of saying goodbye that are often particularly upsetting; with all the restrictions on end of life visiting and funeral attendance, though it is worth persevering with making the best of these.

Fear of death is intimately bound up with the fear of losing those we love and who love us. Again there are all sorts of coping strategies, some healthier than others. But what does Jesus say to those who mourn and who fear mourning? It is significant that one of the categories of those who will be blessed, in the Beatitudes, are those who mourn. It's number two on the list. Blessed are those who mourn because they will be comforted.

Note the future tense; will be comforted, not necessarily comforted straightaway. That's not being harsh, it's just that it is a message of hope, lest you are tempted to think that it is a lie. Blessed are those who mourn because they will be comforted; even if comfort can seem far removed for a while.

Many dwelling places. It is the openheartedness of the Christian vision of heaven that offers comfort to the bereaved. Your loved ones are in God's loving arms. You who grieve are also in God's loving arms. We are, all of us together in God's loving arms. Because of our hope in Jesus Christ, because he is the way, the truth and life,..... all of us dwell in the love of God, together, and death does not break this. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Of course, if the vision of Jesus were exclusive, and judgemental, and controlling, and condemning, then there would indeed be little hope. But it is not; the vision of Jesus is not like that, even if those are exactly the things for which human religion is so often criticised. Rather the vision of Jesus is inclusive and merciful, and full of loving service, new chances, and new life.

This is why Jesus is for us the way, the truth and the life, for without him we could not have such hope, and we could not have such assurance. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

CJ. 10.05.20

Matthew 5.3-10 The Beatitudes

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.