

Fifth Sunday of Easter

THE TRUE AND LIVING WAY

INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

PRAISE

Lord Jesus Christ, risen from death,
praise to you for new hope and new life.

You came to Mary in the garden,
to turn her tears into joy.
Thanks be to you for your love and mercy.

You came to the disciples in the upper room,
to turn their fear into courage.
Thanks be to you for your love and strength.

You came to your companions by the lakeside,
to turn their failure into faith.
Thanks be to you for your love and forgiveness.

You came to Clopas and his friend on the Emmaus road,
to turn their despair into hope.
Thanks be to you for your love and hope.

You come to your people now,
and turn our weakness into strength.
Thanks be to you for your love and faith.

Lord of life, I praise your holy name!
Alleluia! Amen!

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In your own words ask God to be with you in this time of prayer...

Then take a few moments to reflect on your life in the last few days, and in your own words speak to God about it, asking him to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy on me.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

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

READINGS

Read: ACTS 7.55 – end

The conclusion of the moving story of Stephen, the first disciple to die for the faith, summarises the Christian faith. Rather than removed from history, Jesus is now exalted. Luke speaks of him as ‘standing at the right hand of God’. Speaking of Jesus in this way is a common NT image; sometimes he is described as ‘seated’ on God’s right hand, the place of honour at a banquet. Stephen’s words were blasphemy to the ears of the Jewish leaders; he is taken out and stoned to death – an appalling way to die – but, like Jesus, he prays for those who kill him, and commends himself to God.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the story is brief note that those who killed him left their clothes in the safekeeping of Saul. Detached from the action – both in court and at the execution – Saul was able to experience the whole episode in a different way to those more actively involved. I imagine the way Stephen was prepared to die for his faith, and the way he imitated Jesus in the way he died, touched Saul in his depths and stayed with him, even though his immediate response was to blot it out as he commenced his own persecution of the faithful. But later, after his conversion, the example of Stephen must have come back to him, and in the end he too (renamed Paul) died for Christ rather than forswear his faith.

Stephen was the first of many down the centuries who have died for their faith. There is something compelling about those prepared to die for a good and noble cause; martyrdom has power. Tertullian (c. 155–240), one of the first Christian theologians, said the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

As you reflect on the reading, give thanks for the courage and witness of the martyrs.

Say: PSALM 31

This psalm is a confident prayer in distress; Jesus used some words from verse 6 on the Cross. In the In the midst of distress the psalmist remembers the love that God has shown him; he knows that, come what may, that love will never cease, and so he can end with words of courage: 'Be strong, let your heart take courage, all who hope in the Lord.'

Read: JOHN 14.1-14

Last week we read of Jesus as the 'Door'; this week St John uses another image: Jesus as the 'Way'. Before reading the Reflection, take time to reflect on the reading yourself; ask what kind of 'way' is Jesus? and to what kind of destination does he lead?

REFLECTION

Most of the apostles are unknown men. We know their names, but that's about all; legend has filled in the missing details. Of one or two – apart from Peter and Paul – a little more is known, like Thomas who asked Jesus at the last supper where he was going. His question is not simply about the life to come, but also – and more importantly – about life here and now.

Jesus had sought to allay the disciples' anxiety about what would happen after his death. He spoke of that time in terms of a journey – a journey to 'his Father's house' in which there were many dwelling places. And he assured them that they knew the way that he was taking. Thomas did not appreciate that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, and responded that as they did not know where he was going, how could they know the way. In reply Jesus says that he is himself the way, as he is also the truth, and the life.

In what sense is Jesus the way? How we understand Jesus' reply depends, as Daniel Stevick pointed out, on whether *way*, *truth* and *life* are three equal items in a list, or whether one of them is the subject which the other two qualify. Given the structure of the sentence, with the weight on the initial term *way* (the word that baffled Thomas), Stevick suggests that the subject is *the way*: 'The theme is movement – movement toward... Jesus is the *true way*, as he is the true vine and the true light. He is the *living way*, as he is the living water and the living bread. The emphasis belongs on the start of the series – on Jesus as a way, a reliable and vital way.' (Daniel Stevick, *Jesus and His Own*, p. 124.) James Moffat offers a translation of Jesus' reply which conveys this sense: 'I am the real and living way.' I find this reading helpful.

At first sight, Thomas' question seems reasonable enough: to know the way we must first know the destination, but Thomas has not

really understood what Jesus is talking about, and Jesus' response is on an altogether different level. Jesus is not, as Thomas has assumed, talking about a physical destination – his Father's house is not a place – but a spiritual destination, and we arrive there by following the way, the journey of life, that Jesus himself has followed. It is in obedient travelling that we discover the room made ready for us in the Father's house; we need no more directions than the way of obedience that Jesus has shown us. When we receive Holy Communion, the bread and wine are given that they may 'keep us in eternal life' – not *bring us to*, but *keep us in*. Eternal life is a quality of life that begins in this life as we seek to align our hopes and values, our aims and priorities, with those of Jesus. Thomas' question is as much – if not more – about life here and now as it is about the life to come. We find our way not by reading a map, nor by gaining knowledge, but through a personal relationship with Jesus. He needs to become our life, our true and living way.

This true and living way is about what comes from within; the well-spring of our being. Archbishop Michael Ramsay said that being a follower of Jesus did not mean simply thinking that Jesus was a good thing, being on Jesus' side, as it were, but submitting ourselves to him. Submission is not in tune with the spirit of the age (nor really in any age), but it does seem to be one of the marks of sainthood – and we are all called to be saints. In 2003 I led a pilgrimage in the steps of St Benedict and St Francis. In their different ways – and they were very different! – they submitted their lives to Christ and they were transformed. Jesus was their life, the well-spring of their being, and if we are to follow in their steps we too have to allow him to form and shape the way we think and act; we have to allow his perspective to shape the way we look on the world; we have to allow his values to shape our behaviour and our opinions. This does not lead to a dull uniformity, as is evident from

the lives of St Benedict and St Francis; rather it leads to us becoming our true selves.

Several of the NT authors, notably St Paul, talk about this personal transformation in terms of living a virtuous life. We don't hear much about virtue these days; we hear more about values, but the two are not the same. Virtue has something given about it, an objective quality which values do not have. Values are individually chosen, albeit shared by others. They represent the qualities, standards, ethics *we choose* to live by. Values come in many different colours, and in our post-modern world they tend to be eclectic, chosen because they enable us to lead the life we want to lead, without too much concern whether they form a mutually consistent package. The point is that they are my values. They represent my chosen life-style (or that to which I aspire). Values come from me.

Virtue, by contrast, is an inner quality, a grace which enables us to conform our being to the truth, to live a life which is morally pleasing to God. Virtue is *God-given*; it is part of the being of God himself; it is a gift of the Spirit. Virtue accepts that God has determined the qualities, standards and ethics which enable us to live a true human life. Virtue is not concerned so much with life-style as with life-giving style. The point is that our lives have a God-given purpose. Virtue comes from God, and if we accept Jesus as the true and living way we must open ourselves to receive all our virtue from him. This is part of the new birth, the gift of the Spirit, that Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus.

The life-giving style is seen, of course, in the life of Jesus; all his virtue came from God. In the wilderness Satan tempted him to choose the way of the world as the values by which he would be the Messiah. Give the people what they want: turn these stones into bread! Put on a good show: throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple! Be strong and powerful: put your faith in me! Jesus

rejected these temptations choosing instead to depend only on the truth and power of God. He said to his tempter: 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' (Matt. 4.10) Satan tempted Jesus to choose the values of materialism, prestige and power, which would make him look impressive in the eyes of the world. Jesus chose the way of virtue.

The values of today's consumer society are generally opposed to the virtuous life: all choices are equally valid, there are no absolute values; pleasure is what life is all about; appearance is what matters – you can be who you want to be, choosing your *persona* according to how you feel; you are your own god, the centre of your world.

There is a basic moral vacuum at the heart of modern life, and we are all, to some extent, caught up in it. We may feel that Jesus is the true and living way – the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak! Rather than place all our hope on God we have placed it on prosperity and have chosen our values accordingly. In this situation God is calling us to recover virtue. It is not just a matter of choosing Christian values, but of also receiving from God the wisdom and strength to live out those values in the world. This is challenging because it means coming to see the world with God's eyes. We know, for example, that God's special concern is for the poor; Jesus said that one of the signs of the Kingdom is that the poor hear the good news. But we have brought them bad news: it is the poor who loose out in a market economy. Some Christians find this hard to accept – it goes against their values, but if the truth is that this is not part of God's true and living way, then it's us who need to change, and only God's strength can enable us to do so. We need the life-giving style of Jesus; and it comes when he is our well-spring, the source of our life.

How do we do this? If we asked Benedict and Francis how Jesus became the well-spring of their lives, I think they would say through

prayer: asking God for grace, and praying the scriptures, the slow reflective reading of the Bible that takes it seriously as the word of God, that allows the holy book to get inside us, and form us. It happens gradually, slowly but surely, and Jesus comes and dwells in our hearts, the well-spring of our life.

Pause and reflect.

PRAISE

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
such a light as shows a feast;
such a feast as mends in length;
such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
such a joy as none can move;
such a love as none can part;
such a heart as joys in love.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You may like to use the traditional five-fold pattern:

For the Church

... that isolated and persecuted Churches may find strength and courage in the good news of Easter.

For the World

... for an end to war and famine, for food and shelter for those in need ... for a spirit of generosity between the nations.

For family, friends, neighbours and the local community

... for humility to be subject to one another, and at this time to seek the common good.

For the sick and all in need, near and far

... also for those who care for the sick at home, in care, and in hospital.

For those who have died

... and for those whose anniversaries occur at this time, and for those who grieve.

At the end:

Father of all,

send the fire of your Holy Spirit upon your people,
so that we may bear faithful witness to Christ;
in whose name I make my prayers.

Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever.

Amen.