

Sunday Sermon Notes – 5th Sunday of Easter – 10th May 2020

From Rev'd Jilleen Chamber

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Yes, we are still in the Easter season though Easter seems like an afterthought this year and a distant memory. Everything is moving so fast and we have been overwhelmed by the constant bombardment of news and latest restrictions and now we have the slow lifting of restrictions to navigate. What we can and can't do. It would be very easy to bunker down and not come out until spring at the earliest.

This Sunday is Mother's Day and it is very different this year for many of us. We need to be mindful of social distancing and exuberant hugs, vulnerable people, washing our hands and not to touch our faces. We all need to be aware not only for our own safety but so that we won't transmit the virus to our family and friends.

I hope you have all downloaded the COVID-19 tracing app on your mobile phones.

In Queensland we are beginning the slow emergence from lock-down and it will probably be a bit bumpy along the way with outbreaks and local lock-downs. Hopefully, many of us will have learnt the wisdom of social distancing over the past few weeks. Sadly, life will not be able to go back to business as usual for some time – and it could take much longer than we hope. Will we feel safe emerging from our places of isolation and shopping for non-essentials or gathering with a wider circle of friends?

Churches will also be faced with the difficulties inherent in gathering again. We have been learning to sing the Lord's song in the enforced exile of COVID-19. Have we become too comfortable there? How will we continue to be church when we can open the doors of our church buildings again but still need to continue practices of social distancing and not shaking hands? What are the implications for sharing communion? All questions that we will need to answer for ourselves and as a church body. And the answer may be different for each one of us.

Living in a time of confusion is nothing new for the church. The people of the church have lived and survived during many, many confusing times over the past (almost) two thousand years. We have survived persecutions and oppression, wars and revolutions, the turmoil of the Reformation, Darwinism and the Enlightenment period, revivals in the church, and sadly times of apathy within and without the church. The absolutely amazing thing is that the church has continued to survive and to witness to the teachings of Jesus and the love of God the Father revealed in the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit.

During the period between Easter and Pentecost, our lectionary readings explore who Jesus is for us. He is the one who understands our doubts and fears; the Good Shepherd who knows us by name, cares for us, and protects us in times of fear and danger. In our gospel reading for this Sunday from John 14: 1-14 Jesus tells us: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled.' We hear the words about Jesus being the way, the truth and the life. The one who reveals God's truth to us. He shows us the way to the Father and the way we are to live in relationship with God and with one another. And the one who came that we may have his abundant life and his joy. The one who has gone ahead to prepare a place for us in the Father's house. And the one who reveals the Father to us.

John 14: 1-6 is often chosen as a reading for funerals. It is comforting and gives us that assurance that our life doesn't finish when we close our eyes for the last time. Jesus has already prepared a place where he will receive us when this life is over: in the Father's house.

Because we use portions of the gospels for our Sunday readings, we often miss their context. These reassurances to Jesus' disciples happen after the Last Supper on the evening of Jesus' arrest. He will be tried and crucified the next day. Jesus knows what is to happen to him and he is trying to tell his disciples that they shouldn't be troubled by what will happen to him!

Jesus reassures them that there isn't any need for them to be in doubt or fear by what is to happen. Instead they are to keep trusting: to believe in God and also in Jesus himself. Although they may feel deserted frightened and confused by what will happen, he is going on ahead and will return for them.

These verses give us a glimpse into God's house where there are many dwelling places (monai). The Greek word 'monai' has also been translated as rooms and mansions. It is the noun form of the word 'meno' translated as 'abide' in John 15: 4 where Jesus calls his disciples to 'abide in me as I abide in you'. Jesus is talking here about a close and connected relationship between himself and us. (Jesus is the vine, we are the branches). Is Jesus offering us something more than a place?

When we go to visit someone we love, what are we looking for? Are we visiting the house or the occupant of the house? Our relationship is with the person in the house not the house. When we come to church, is our relationship with the building or is it with God and God's people who meet us there. Jesus is offering us a living relationship of abiding with the Father not just a heavenly place to hang our eternal hat.

So often we put God in a box and limit how we think God should act. We may have difficulty relating to God the Father. Sometimes because of our own personal history or because of the fierce image of God that we might have formed in our minds. Someone who keeps track of all our wrongs and misdeeds in his book. The Father is somewhere up there and somewhat remote, while we are down here. Jesus we can understand as he became human and thus relational: he showed his great love for us and died that our sins would be forgiven and to reconcile us to the Father. We forget that God has promised to wash our sins whiter than snow and to remember them no more.

Jesus tells us that we know the Father because we know him. When Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus responds that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Whatever he has said or done reflects the Father who dwells in him. (John 14: 7-11) Jesus reveals the Father to us in and through what he has done. Just as Jesus is gracious and loving, so is the Father. Just as Jesus is forgiving, so is the Father. Just as Jesus is relational and wants a relationship with us, so does the Father. The Father understands our fears and is with us in the midst of the difficulties of our life and in our sorrows, hurts and confusions. Jesus is our guide who will continually reveal the truth of the Father's great love for us. And he will help us to release the Father from of the box we have created. To have a true abiding relationship with God the Father: to call the Father 'Abba' (daddy) as Jesus did. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

As we face the next phase of our life after lock-down, we have the assurance that God will lead us on these new paths. He is the one who will give us courage and wisdom for the road ahead. The One who is the way, will himself be our guide. He will bring us into the renewed life of God's people here in this place. God's love for us is truly amazing and lifegiving.

There are two hymns that have been on my mind. The first had been selected for this Sunday:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear,
what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer:
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

The other is:

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
gold of obedience and incense of lowliness bring, and adore him: the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness, high on his heart he will bear it for you,
comfort your sorrows, and answer your prayerfulness, guiding your steps in the way best for you.

He is risen indeed!

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you his peace. Amen.

Blessings Jilleen