

## Sunday 10 May 2020: In Silent Sleepless Hours

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Fifth Sunday of Lent.*

**Readings:** [Acts 7.55-60](#); [1 Peter 2.11-25](#), [John 10.1-10](#)

It's in the sleepless hours of the night, when I often ruminate about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on our Cathedral – its ministry, our staff, our members, our finances, our long-term wellbeing – that the words at the beginning of today's gospel reading particularly speak to me. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled', Jesus tells his disciples gathered in the Upper Room of the Last Supper, 'believe in God, believe also in me'. At a time when the world is facing the greatest health crisis in over a hundred years, it's hard not to let your hearts be troubled. I find that the temptation is great to check the latest numbers of infections, to check whether the curve is flattening or whether there are unexpected spikes. I feel far from friends and family in Europe, whose experience of the crisis is so different from our own, where deaths are so much more plentiful, and so many more people mourn loved ones or friends who have fallen victim to the virus. How can Jesus tell us, his present-day disciples, that we should not let our hearts be troubled, when there is so much trouble and care, worry and fear in the world around us?

When Jesus first spoke these words, he was making his farewells to his disciples. They were gathered in a stranger's function room in Jerusalem, met there together to celebrate the feast of the liberation from slavery of their people. This was a celebration like none other they had experienced. It was subversive, in hiding from the authorities who were seeking to arrest Jesus. It was subdued, with Jesus telling his disciples clearly that he would leave them behind, that he would go to a place where they would not be able to follow. It was a meal where the master served the students, washed their feet and wiped them with a towel, and told them that it was by selfless loving service like this, that people would know that they were the followers of Love. It was a meal, where the host broke bread and told the diners that the bread they shared was his broken body. It was a meal that would be celebrated throughout the world forever, as a memorial of the brokenness of the world: its selfishness and sin, its fear and fury, its disease and death, until the time at which Jesus would return from the place to which he was going. At the table, as he made his farewells to his friends, he left them with many burning questions: not only about the significance of what they were celebrating, but more importantly about their future.

Why did Jesus have to leave them, would have been the foremost of those questions. Had they not left everything - friends, families, jobs – behind, precisely so that they could be with him, listen to his words and witness his works? And if he had to leave them, where was he going, and why would they not be able to follow there now, only later? And then there were two more, dark foretellings that Jesus made at the table: one of their number would betray Jesus to the authorities, would hand him over. And another, Peter, whom Jesus had appointed their leader, would deny him three times. The disciples were right to feel worried, not only

about what would happen to them in the coming hours, as night darkened and the dawn of Good Friday would begin to dawn, but also about their longer future. What kind of a future would a future be in which Jesus was absent from them? What kind of discipleship would following Jesus be, when Jesus has gone away to a place where they were not able to follow? And Jesus understands their concerns and fears, and tells them: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled'. Do not ruminate on what the immediate or longer-term future holds. Do not scenario plan-for what tomorrow may bring, or next week or the weeks after. There are more important responses to this crisis: 'believe in God, believe also in me', he tells them.

Anchor yourselves deeply in God, hold fast to the One that remains constant and firm, the one true foundation that remains when everything else is shifting so radically, is what Jesus tells the disciples. Believe in God as the rock and foundation of your existence, and in that firm faith face the troubles that assail your heart. 'Believe in God: believe also in me', he adds. Throughout their journey with him, Jesus had shown them in words and actions that the distant creator of this world and he are one. That they could know God as a Father, if they placed their trust in Jesus the Son. 'Believe in God and believe also in me'. Believe in him who has acted from of old and whose promises are true. Believe in me, who has acted in your own lives, and whose actions you know to be a revelation of God. Signs of 'the greater things' promised to them at the beginning of their story together: 'heaven opened and angels descending and ascending on the Son of Man', as Jesus told Nathanael under the fig tree, at a time in Galilee that, in the present situation, must seem to them to be as far away as the time when Jesus will return to them.

'You will see heaven opened', Jesus had promised them then. Now he tells them: 'in my Father's house there are many dwelling places and I go to prepare a place for you'. I will soon leave you to open heaven for you, to restore the way home to God. I will soon leave you to be lifted up so that angels may descend and ascend on me to the heavenly home that is there for you from everlasting to everlasting. I will soon be lifted high on a cross for all to see, and draw all people to myself, so that where I am you may be also, he now tells. 'I go to prepare a place for you and you know the way to that place'.

The way of the cross, which will be lifted high to heaven, to reach the home of God and connect it once more to humankind. The cross that will be the place where all the brokenness and sin, the sadness and fear, the frailty and death of our world is placed, is laid down as messengers from the heavenly Father use the body of the Son as a ladder to bring God's message of sins forgiven and life restored from heaven to earth, and to carry human souls from earth to heaven. 'You know the way to the place where I am going', Jesus tells the disciples.

And Thomas speaks for all human confusion, takes the conversation from the Jesus-view of the world – from eternity to eternity – to the present moment. It's not that Thomas hasn't heard Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God, nor is it about whether or not he had

comprehended it. It's much more about the present moment: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going', he asks, in much the same way in which Peter had once rebuked Jesus when the storm was raging and their master slept: 'Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?' We do not know where you are going now, we do not know why we can't follow now. We do not know what will happen at the end of this night. We do not know what will happen to this group of followers when you have gone – one to betray you, one to deny you – we do not know what will happen now. When Peter rebuked Jesus in the midst of the gale on Lake Galilee Jesus simply had got up and stilled the storm. And now Jesus does the same: he tells Thomas that he is the way, he is truth, and he is life. That, whatever storms of life may be raging, Jesus will be trustworthy and true. That, whenever lives are taken, Jesus will gift life. That, whenever we do not know where to turn, whenever we lose the way, Jesus will be our way.

Until they meet again, in the same room following the resurrection, the disciples will not understand the significance of these words. Some will see Jesus hang on a cross and die, and not realise that is by giving up his own life that Jesus forges a Way back to the Father. Some will witness his trial and not realise, that it is by standing silent in the face of his accusers and those who by lies and evil accusations secure his condemnation, that Jesus is revealed to be the Truth. Some will tend his broken body and lovingly place in a tomb and not realise that it is by his death that Jesus is shown to be the Life.

For now, in their confusion and fear, their pointless planning for the next few days, the next few weeks, Jesus tells them that they should let go of their troubles, and trust in him and the Father who sent him. 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me: believe in me that I am in the Father and the Father in me', he tells Philip and his friends, and reaffirms their own admission earlier in the gospel: 'Lord where else can we go, only you have the words of eternal life'. For now, for this time of troubled hearts, only this is important: that 'anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life'.

At the end of our gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples a powerful gift. They will not understand the importance of the words he has told them, living themselves through the trouble and confusion of the events that lead up to Good Friday and Easter Day. It is only after the resurrection that they begin to realise gradually what it is that Jesus had truly spoken about. But they do realise that in the troubles in which they find themselves in – the fear of being left behind, of being left alone, of their fellowship being dispersed by betrayal and denial – they do realise that even in the time when their hearts are most troubled, their fears and troubles will be heard by God.

'I will do whatever you ask in my name', Jesus tells them, 'so that the Father may be glorified in the Son'. Whenever you pray, I will bring your prayer to the Father, who is trustworthy and true, whose promises are from of old, Jesus tells them. Whenever you pray in accordance with my words and will, your prayer will be heard in heaven: 'If in my name you ask me for

anything, I will do it', Jesus says as he gifts his disciples the means by which they may face the troubles that assail their hearts: prayer.

When your hearts are troubled, pray to the Father in my name, Jesus tells them, and only moments later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, will model for them what such prayer in times of trouble looks like. 'Father, if it is your will let this cup pass from me; but not my will but your will be done', he will himself pray in abject trouble and fear. And the disciples are to do the same: 'if in my name' – if by faith in me, if in accordance with my will, if in the unity that I reveal - 'you ask me for anything, I will do it'.

The unity of Father and the Son are best shown forth in prayer, the Father is glorified in the Son when we pray in his name. The two are shown to be One: 'believe in God', the creator and foundation of all our being. 'Believe also in me', the Son who speaks the words of the Father and does the works of God who dwells in him, and who, through both, reveals the eternal God who seeks to dwell in each believer until the time when he will call them home to the Father's home. The place of many dwellings that he prepares for us. At the time when he will come again, and 'take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also'.

In this time of uncertainty and great trouble, when we are kept awake by the troubles of the world, and our fears for tomorrow, next week, next year; when we worry about our fellowship and our discipleship, our loved ones, friends and neighbours; let us turn to the powerful gift Jesus gave his friends on the night before he himself was shown to be the Way to the Father through his death on a cross. In the silent sleepless hours of the night, pray to the Father through the Son: pleading his mercy, asking for his peace; praying for protection; seeking his forgiveness, his nearness and love.

And in the strength of the knowledge that, at the time that he determines, he will come, and take us to himself, let us live courageously and give generously. Through our witness may Christ the Way be shown forth among the conflicting and confusing pathways of this world. Through our truth-telling may Christ the Truth stand against the lies and falsehoods of this age. Through our life-giving actions may Christ the Life be revealed in this generation, and in our midst. 'I will come again so that where I am you may be also'. 'Maranatha: come, Lord Jesus'. Amen.