

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings: John 14:1-14, Acts 7:55-70, 1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14 Good News Translation (GNT):

14 “Do not be worried and upset,” Jesus told them. “Believe^[a] in God and believe also in me. ² There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so.^[b] ³ And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am. ⁴ You know the way that leads to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?”

⁶ Jesus answered him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me. ⁷ Now that you have known me,” he said to them, “you will know^[c] my Father also, and from now on you do know him and you have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father; that is all we need.”

⁹ Jesus answered, “For a long time I have been with you all; yet you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Why, then, do you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe, Philip, that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I have spoken to you,” Jesus said to his disciples, “do not come from me. The Father, who remains in me, does his own work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. If not, believe because of the things I do. ¹² I am telling you the truth: those who believe in me will do what I do—yes, they will do even greater things, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask for in my name, so that the Father's glory will be shown through the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask me^[d] for anything in my name, I will do it.”

Acts 7:55-60 Good News Translation (GNT):



⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw God's glory and Jesus standing at the right side of God. ⁵⁶ "Look!" he said. "I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

⁵⁷ With a loud cry the Council members covered their ears with their hands. Then they all rushed at him at once, ⁵⁸ threw him out of the city, and stoned him. The witnesses left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They kept on stoning Stephen as he called out to the Lord, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!" He said this and died.

1 Peter 2:2-10 Good News Translation (GNT):

² Be like newborn babies, always thirsty for the pure spiritual milk, so that by drinking it you may grow up and be saved. ³ As the scripture says, "You have found out for yourselves how kind the Lord is."

⁴ Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by people as worthless but chosen by God as valuable. ⁵ Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For the scripture says,

"I chose a valuable stone,
which I am placing as the cornerstone in Zion;
and whoever believes in him will never be disappointed."

⁷ This stone is of great value for you that believe; but for those who do not believe:

"The stone which the builders rejected as worthless
turned out to be the most important of all."

⁸ And another scripture says,

"This is the stone that will make people stumble,
the rock that will make them fall."

They stumbled because they did not believe in the word; such was God's will for them.

⁹ But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light. ¹⁰ At one time you were not God's people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter, it is also the first Sunday of Christian Aid week, and the Sunday of the VE 75th celebration weekend.

We are currently going through a unprecedented period in our lives. Never before have we been told, en masse, to stay home, stay indoors, not meet with people, not hug our family and friends. Each week we listen for the news from the government to see whether things are improving, looking for a chink of light that will tell us things are getting better. Somehow, that chink always seems to be a bit further away, stays elusive. Will this ever end? How will it end? When will it end?

Perhaps for the first time ever, we get a very small inkling of how those families at home during the 2nd world war must have felt. They were worried, scared, distraught, not knowing the how, when, why or how long of the war. They all knew family, friends, neighbours, who had gone away to fight, or stayed home in essential work. What they didn't know was how and when it was going to end. Would Britain be defeated, and if so, how would that turn out? Or would Britain be victorious and survive, and if so, what would the country be like when the war came to an end? Where would people live now homes had been destroyed? Where would the jobs be for those returning from the battlefields? How would families regroup now they were back together again? What about those who had lost loved ones - how would they cope?

And what about people around the world today with whom Christian Aid are currently working: The people suffering inequality in Sudan. The women without rights in Afghanistan. Those experiencing gender inequalities in South America. The marginalised communities in El Salvador. Defending people's rights in Israel and occupied Palestinian territory. Women at risk of violence in Iraq. Refugees needing humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. The list goes on.

Nothing seems to change, the world seems to be in as much turmoil as it has ever been. We can celebrate that we are no longer engaged in a war, the European stage of which ended 75 years ago, but would continue for another few months yet until victory in Japan was achieved. But people are still marginalised, abused and controlled by corrupt governments. The whole world is currently suffering a pandemic that we don't understand and for which we can't, as yet, find a cure or a vaccine.

When we look back to biblical times, things were much the same then too. Wars, corruption, famines, plagues.

So, as Christians, how do we cope? Where do we get our strength from? Why do we have hope at all? How are we to find our way?

We need to re-group, re-ground ourselves in who we are in God.

We are his Children, He knows each one of us by name. He loves us.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' Jesus tells us, 'Trust in God and trust also in me'
(John 14:1 NIV)

We can follow Jesus with hope for He goes ahead of us showing us the way. The passage in John's gospel speaks of Jesus telling us about His Father's house having many rooms and that Jesus goes to prepare a place for us there. It is a piece of scripture often used at funerals for it brings comfort in the knowledge that this is not our forever home. There is another place for us where we will be with God our Father, where we will be united with Him. How do we get there? Jesus tells us that He is the way. Not only the way He is the truth and the life.

However, these verses point not only to the future, after we die, but they also point to this life, the here and now, and how we should be living.

You need a way to live your life - Jesus is the way; He guides us in the way to live, for He lived on earth and showed us.

You need to know what is good and true, and also what isn't - Jesus is the truth; learn from his teaching, study the Gospels.

You want to live a good fulfilling life? Jesus is The life. Abundant, fulfilling life is what He came to bring to all those who trust and believe in Him.

But Jesus didn't promise a life free of care or concern or worry, and his early followers certainly didn't find that. Stephen, as we read in Acts, by following Jesus, became the first to be killed for his faith and was stoned to death, and he was given the vision of heaven opening as he prayed. The young churches setting up around the Roman Empire were viewed with hostility and suspicion, but 1 Peter speaks about them being built together like living stones.

Jesus assures his disciples, assured Stephen and the early Church, and us that He is the way, the signpost that points ahead through the trials and turmoil of life so we can find our direction, and ultimately be united with Him.

Stephen was stoned to death by those who refused to hear the Gospel news, they threw stones and killed him. But there are other uses and types of stones - as we read in 1 Peter - we are the living stones of God's church, building it up as we worship Him, pray and serve others in His name.

During these difficult times. more than ever, we need to be living stones, stones that build up, encourage and show people the way to live by trusting the truth of who Jesus is, not stones that condemn and bring despair.

The world we are in at the moment seems to have lost its' way, governments and ministers are wandering about trying to find a way through. People are suffering injustice and inequality.

But Jesus tells us to follow Him.

He navigates a path through life that we can follow. By following His path we can find our way knowing that Jesus is with us, and is ahead of us. What is more, we can bring others with us on that path, by being the path of living stones for them to follow, showing God's love and sharing our hope in Him with those around us.

Like people going through the war, we don't know how or when these times of worry will end but we have hope for the future, through our trust in our Lord Jesus who came to earth to tell us: 'Believe in God, believe also in me. I am the way, the truth and the life' Now, more than ever - trust in Him. Amen

How we can be Living Stones of God's Love:

The following is adapted from 7 Ways to Bless Others in a Worldwide Crisis by Catherine Segars:

1. Ask more

Ask God to put someone on your heart who doesn't have anyone checking in on them throughout the week and set reminders to call them regularly. (*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6.2*)

2. Send more

Take a few minutes to send something thoughtful (text, homemade card, Bible verse, jigsaw puzzle of a family photo) to someone isolated in this crisis. (*God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. Hebrews 6.10*)

3. Give more

Give financially to those organisations who are helping people affected by the crisis but who you can't reach physically. (*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6.2*)

4. Leave more

Don't buy what you don't need. (*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4.19*)

5. Thank more

On your rare ventures into the outside world, thank those who are working heavily

trafficked areas: the grocery store workers, fast-food cashiers, postmen and women, delivery workers. (*I thank my God every time I remember you. Philippians 1:3*)

6. Do more

If you find yourself in a position to “do more” during this crisis, seize the moment. (*And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Matthew 5.41, NKJV*)

7. Pray more

Nothing blesses others more or accomplishes more than lifting the needs of others up in prayer. Make a list of people who need your intercession every day. Put it somewhere obvious and pray. (*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5.16*)

Prayer from Christian Aid:

Loving God,
strengthen our innermost being
with your love that bears all things
even the weight of this global pandemic
even the long haul of watching for symptoms
of patiently waiting for this to pass
watching and waiting,
keeping our gaze fixed on you,
and looking out for our neighbours
near and far.
Instil in our shaken souls
the belief and hope that all things
are possible with your creative love
for strangers to become friends
for science to source solutions
for resources to be generously shared
so everyone, everywhere, may have what they need
for your perfect love that knows no borders
may cast out any fear and selfishness that divides.
May your love that never ends
be our comfort, strength and guide
for the wellbeing of all and
the glory of God.
Amen

Music: Way maker - Leeder <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXQGTInPpZU>