

Bishop Karen's Sermon for Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020

John 14: 1 – 11

### Communities of Hope

Speaking to my mother the other day on the telephone, she told me that she had spent quite a while on the phone with an old school friend reminiscing about VE Day and what they each did on that day. Her friend remembered going to Southend where at the end of the pier a Navy vessel was moored with all its crew telling stories of life on board and of war. My mum did not think that she and her family had celebrated in any way on that day but could remember VJ day, three months later, much better. Both days stand out in our history as moments of hope.

I am sure there are many memories being rekindled this weekend from those who lived through that



time; of those who were in London that day caught up in the celebrations; of the story of the young Princess Elizabeth leaving the palace with Princess Margaret that night and mixing with the crowds; of those who were exhausted with the war effort and of those who were grieving for loved ones who would never return home. For those of us who were not there our memories have probably been informed by stories or films or old news reels as well as from school history lessons.

I am not surprised at my mother's apparent lack of celebration. Billericay in Essex was quite a scattered community then without cul de sacs in which to have street parties and the continuation of rationing probably meant that extra income for treats and parties was not readily available to those, like my grandfather, who relied on local building work for a living. The war in Europe may have ended, however extreme fighting was still taking place in the Far East with many soldiers still involved, or in prisoner of war camps, including my grandmother's brother.

I always think that any commemoration is a time of mixed emotions, particularly when it comes to war because of the losses involved. Triumph so often comes through tragedy, and victory, however we look at it, always comes at a price.

This weekend we give thanks for those who gave their life in the Second World War. We give thanks that we have enjoyed peace in our time and for our present-day partnerships with those nations which were then our enemies.

I am sure we shall also remember this VE Day anniversary as we will remember Easter 2020, spent not with all our families or friends, or out with our neighbours, or away on holiday but very firmly at home either alone or those with whom we share our homes. There will be lots of memories of this time in years to come and again both sad ones and hopefully good ones which will emerge from this period. Like the war, I expect, we shall view it as a season which contributed to the reshaping of our communal, national and global life in years to come. Our memories will also be of friends and loved ones who have died, of being ill ourselves, of nursing the sick or helping a neighbour, of having to adapt to a swift lockdown, of home schooling or of anxiety and fear but also of other more positive memories. How we commemorate this time in years to come will be interesting to see but there is

bound to be a mixture of emotions about a period of our life which will have been a kind of battle of its own as we have fought the Covid-19 pandemic.

Times of remembrance are important to us because they instil in us both hope and faith as we look back and see what we have come through. It is also a very significant Biblical theme as the people of Israel were encouraged to remember what God had done for them in leading them out of slavery to freedom in the promised land. They were encouraged to remember how God had taught them to live with their work, worship and witness all being part of their response to the faithfulness and generosity of God who loved his people. All of this caught up in a covenantal relationship which demanded fidelity and bestowed love and blessing.

Our gospel reading for today from St John's gospel follows this theme. In one way this part of the gospel, appearing after the last supper, seems to be Jesus preparing his followers for life when he would no longer be with them. However, with John writing the gospel some years after the resurrection appearances we can see it as important teaching for an embryo church which at the time cannot be discerned as having any organisation or structure beyond that of mutual love. In fact, the whole Gospel of John takes place in its entirety on a borderland. On one side is the world of remembered events or history, and on the other is the world beyond; the 'being with the Father' of which Christ himself speaks and, as one commentator puts it, hemmed between the two is the existence of the life of John's community. It is all very much about being and becoming.

Chapter 14 of John's Gospel has Jesus speaking of his return to the Father while he promises to do for his disciples anything they ask in his name. The only condition is that out of love they keep his commands. In his absence he will send them another Counsellor, the Spirit of truth and he will come back to them. Fidelity to his word is the proof of their love while he is away and he gives peace as his farewell gift to his friends, not this world's peace but the kind that negates their stress and fear.

In fact, the Gospel today begins with the words 'Let not your hearts be troubled.' Do not be nervous, anxious, shattered, concerned. It may seem meaningless talk to any of us who have felt like that or are feeling like that now. Except here the speaker is Jesus and he provides the means to the end. As you commit yourself totally to God in a relationship of trust, he says, so must you do to me. The pain of life, separation and cross cannot last forever. Live in hope.

Set where it is in the gospel, in a short time the disciples world was going to collapse around them. At such a time there was only one thing to do – stubbornly hold on to trust in God.

These were reassuring words for then and they are reassuring words for now too. 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'. The present will give way to the future, says Jesus, because I shall see to it. A permanent place of abiding with God is in store for all who believe, and the destiny of Jesus is likewise laid up for his friends. Those who are clergy, like me, almost know this passage off by heart as it is recited walking into church in the front of a coffin. It has made its way into the intoned liturgy of thanksgiving and remembrance. However, the response of the disciples is immediate consternation. Their ignorance of his destination forces Thomas to ask his question. Therefore, we too go with them in their questioning 'How can we know the way?' and we discover again that Jesus is the route, the reason for the journey.

The Church will always be missionary because it is convinced it possesses in the gospel a peculiar treasure. Jesus' words 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' can be problematic in our pluralistic world, however Johannine thought is not fuel for the soap box, neither is it a denial of all that most people on earth hold dear as 'their way' to God or simply their 'way'. John is calling Christians to go to the Father through Jesus and to bring a

knowledge of Jesus to any who are disposed to hear of him, trusting in both the providence of God and God's surprise turning up in people's lives at the most unlikely times.

In the passage we discover that believers in Christ have two ways to go 'Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe in me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.' A life of faith will unlock wonders to a community of believers and paradoxically, we read, Jesus' return to the Father is the condition of performing these works. Throughout the gospel runs the theme that as a result of Jesus' absence all that could not be achieved in his presence is possible.

That was all wonderful news for the early Christians, and wonderful news for us too especially as we in lockdown move from Crucifixion and Resurrection towards Ascension and Pentecost.

They are words too for a Church which will emerge different after this particular season is over, of the re-creation of communities around trust and prayer and service; trust in God's love and provision; prayer in the name of Jesus Christ and willing service. Also reflected in the Old Testament entreaty from God to remember his love through work, worship and witness.

As we look back and think of those disciples gathered around Jesus, as we think of the early church, and as we remember life 75 years ago and reflect on our own lives now, we can see that there comes a time for all of us when we have to believe where we cannot prove, and to accept where we cannot understand. If, even in the darkest hour, we believe that somehow there is a purpose in life and that somehow that purpose is love, then even the unbearable becomes bearable and even in the darkness there is still a glimmer of light. But Jesus adds something to that. Jesus says not only 'Believe in God', he also says 'Believe in me.' For Jesus is the proof that God is willing to give to us everything He has to give.

That is what it means for the church to be a community of hope at this time. If we believe that God is as Jesus taught him to be, if we believe that in Jesus we see what God is like, then, in face of that amazing love, it becomes, not easy, but at least possible, to accept even what we cannot understand, and even in the storms of life to retain a faith that gives us both hope and peace.