

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 10th MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

Jesus said, "I am the Way." But the way to what?

Not simply to a future heaven, although that is part of the Christian hope. But our hope is also that God reaches into our present, and begins to transform it as we model our lives on Jesus the Way. As we become people of faith – "God's own people", as St Peter puts it – our lives become a force for God's transforming love and power in the world. And that faith is based on nothing less than trust in who God is – his eternal faithfulness to us.

So as we begin this service, we pause for a moment to think about our own journey: "Which Way are we following?" And we remind ourselves of God's utter faithfulness to us – the God who is "ever the maker and keeper of our days."



REMINDING OURSELVES WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST

"Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light...."

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy."

1 Peter 2:5,10

The peace of the Lord be always with you;
And also with you.

OPENING SONG

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down, you are before me,
Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
And with love everlasting you besiege me:
In ev'ry moment of life or death, you are.

Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
You have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding:
God of my present, my past and future too.

Although your Spirit is upon me,
Still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you:
Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down, you are before me,
Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

Music by Bernadette Farrell

REMINDING OURSELVES OF GOD'S LOVING PRESENCE WITH US (From Psalm 139)

O Lord, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

**You mark out my journeys and my resting place
and are acquainted with all my ways.**

For there is not a word on my tongue,
but you, O Lord, know it altogether.

**You encompass me behind and before
and lay your hand upon me.**

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
so high that I cannot attain it.

**Where can I go then from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?**

If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.

**If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,**

Even there your hand shall lead me,
your right hand hold me fast.

**How deep are your counsels to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!**

If I count them, they are more in number than the sand,
and at the end, I am still in your presence.

**Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
try me and examine my thoughts.**

See if there is any way of wickedness in me
and lead me in the way everlasting.

[Silence]

**Creator God,
may every breath we take be for your glory,
may every footstep show you as our way,
that, trusting in your presence in this world,
we may, beyond this life, still be with you
where you are alive and reign
for ever and ever. Amen.**

GOSPEL READING

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."



Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe 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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION *(by Tobias Thornes)*

There is a lot of fear, at the moment, in our world – even more so than before the present pandemic.

It was fear that led to the lockdown in the first place – fear of spreading the virus. Fear for our own health and that of others (and perhaps of the authorities!) has led us to close our churches and hold services online. There's fear about jobs, shortages, what will happen when this is over, about friends and neighbours who are sick – all around us fear is rife.

But we, as Christians, are not in the business of fear. We are not a people of fear, but a people of faith – a people called to demonstrate that faith in what we do and what we say. We are the ones to ensure that rampant fear doesn't become a permanent fixture of the post-lockdown world, as an unintended consequence that has the potential to do even worse damage than the virus – if we let it.

Our own patron St Stephen wasn't afraid when facing the hostile attacks of his accusers – even though he had to endure being stoned to death – and nor should St Stephen's Church be afraid in the face of sickness and death. Even in the midst of his painful assault, Stephen looked up and saw Christ amongst the clouds – because he had faith. We too, if we share this faith, can look up and see the light of Christ amidst the clouds of despair and uncertainty.

After all, this is what Christ himself teaches us to do. Our Gospel reading today is a passage often used at funerals – 'let not your hearts be troubled,' says Jesus, though he is about to leave the disciples – 'I go to prepare a place for you'. Certainly, these words are a comfort at any time when death is near. They remind us that, as Christians, we don't need to be afraid of death: death in this world is but the gateway to Christ's house in heaven. Later on in John 14, Christ reminds us that if we love him, we should be glad that he has gone back to the Father, out of this wicked world – and the same is true of all the loved ones we have lost here, who are gained in heaven. We should not be sad for them – though we miss them, and are sad because they are not with us. For theirs is now a better existence.

But there's more to it than this. This same reading is also used on the feast of Philip and James, which we celebrated not so long ago on May 1st. That's because, like Stephen, Philip and James were among the early committed disciples of Christ who would give anything out of faith in him, and the passage has a lot to say to us who would follow in their footsteps – in this world, as well as in the next.

Jesus came into the world not primarily to tell us about the next life, but to show us the meaning of our lives now, and how to live them here in Earth.

When Thomas – ‘doubting Thomas’, the voice of scepticism, reason and rationality which we all have and which are not bad things – queries how we can possibly know where Jesus is going or how to get there, Jesus’ response is clear. He is all the evidence we need, both of how to live now and of the boundless love of the Lord Jesus was sent into the world as proof by God. ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’ he says. Emulate him for the Way to live, listen to him to hear the Truth, trust in him and you will have Life.

Jesus came into the world to show us God – to know him is to know God, and to see him is to see God. Just as Jesus knew his disciples personally, calling them by name – ‘have I been with you so long, Philip, and you have not known me?’ he says – God knows us each personally. We are his disciples in this time and place, and he has a plan in mind for each of us.

How, then, can we fulfil God’s plan for the here and now? God is calling us to have faith, not fear; to be built up as a strong spiritual house in which others may take refuge. Our emblem is the sign of the cross; our foundation stone is a stumbling block: our message is one of life springing out of the instruments of death, of light conquering the deepest darkness. Let’s become that message, that Truth, that Life, that joy, in our communities today. Let’s shine that ray of hope for the future, following St Stephen, by refusing to cower in fear and insisting on trusting in God. Let’s dare to pray for a better world, in the sure knowledge that ‘whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.’

TIME FOR REFLECTION....

PRAYERS

As living stones,
Let us pray for the building up of God’s Church,
And for the world God loves.

Living God, our lives are in your hands,
And we offer you all that we are,
All that our past has made us,
And all that we may become.
Build us up by the power of your Spirit
Into a spiritual temple
Where you are glorified day after day,
In all our praise and worship,
And in our love for one another and for the world.

Silence

You are our strong rock:

Our strong rock and our shelter.

Living God, our planet,
With the abundant life of which we are part,
Is so small and vulnerable.
Sharpen our consciences to sense your direction
And protect us from all that draws us away from you.
Guide our leaders in the way of truth
And realign us all to values which are founded on you.

Silence

You are our strong rock:

Our strong rock and our shelter.

Living God, may the Way which Jesus shows us
Be the Way we live out our daily lives
Around the table, in the daylight and the dark,
In our closeness and our distances,
In the tensions and the sense of real community.

Silence

You are our strong rock:

Our strong rock and our shelter.

Living God, you can use and transform all our experiences.

We lay before you now

All for whom this time is especially one

of pain or anguish, tragedy or conflict

Which is hard to bear.

We stand alongside them in their suffering,

And offer it to your transforming, healing love.

We take a few moments to remember before God those who are struggling with illness – those we know, and those we don't.

Silence

You are our strong rock:

Our strong rock and our shelter.

Living God, we remember those who have died

And pray for them now.

Lead them into the light of eternity,

And keep us all in the Way that leads us

To share your everlasting life.

Among those who have died, we remember Alan Renwick, Helen McCabe, Hilary Jones, John Smith, Howard Cotterill, Hugh Stanbra, Sheila Wilshaw, Stan Woodfield, Roy Summers, and Daphne link – and those whose anniversaries fall at this time – Joan Kendall, Jim Thorp, Jo Wasley, Alice Laver, Joy Smith, John Life, Philip King, Reg and Marjorie Gumery. We remember, too, the victims of Coronavirus, and the medical staff who have given their lives in service of others.

Silence

You are our strong rock:

Our strong rock and our shelter.

Living God, we thank you

That in Jesus you have shown us the Way,

In human terms that we can understand.

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer (this version, or the traditional one)

Rejoicing in God's new creation, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

ENDING

We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
Be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

CLOSING SONG

**God be with you till we meet again;
By his counsels guide, uphold you;
With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you till we meet again.**

