

Easter 5 A April 20, 2008: Wesley 9 & 10:30am 1 Peter 2. 2-10 & John 14. 1-14 Rev Peter Walker

Abraham Lincoln learned to read at home using a small number of books, including the Bible, and he also heard his Mother saying over and over again certain Biblical verses, and was very good at learning them by heart.

Lincoln's Mother died when he was a boy. In later life he not only recited the biblical verses he memorised in order to make a point or to puncture someone's pride; he would say those verses, quietly to himself, because as he did so he would hear the tones of his Mother's voice and this brought him comfort and good memories. Lincoln had a troubled relationship with his Father, who lived a long life; he had a great love for his Mother, who lived a short one.

A story is told of how, when he was a young lawyer, working in the southern part of Illinois (in the mid West), Lincoln rode out from Springfield to a small town nearby to make a will for a woman who was dying. After the will had been signed and witnessed, the woman asked Lincoln to read a few verses from the Bible. A copy of the scriptures was produced, but he didn't open it. Instead, from memory, he recited the opening verses of the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel.

Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?

Lincoln's adult life was a hard one; not only for those reasons known to us because of his public role - a presidency during a civil war which eventually led to his assassination. Two of his three sons died as young boys, one while Lincoln was in the White House. I sometimes wonder how he coped, and whether those also were times when he quoted this passage from memory.

Do not let your heart be troubled... In my Father's house there are many rooms...

Perhaps none of us knows what it feels like to be a displaced person; a refugee, or someone without a home. I don't. But even though I cannot relate directly to that experience, I do know how it feels to have lost your sense of place in life. Perhaps you do as well. There are few experiences that cut so deeply as those in which you have lost your sense of belonging. To no longer have a loving relationship, or meaningful work, or community where you have a part to play, these also, it might be fair to say, are the experiences of a 'displaced' person. Somewhere in that list you may be able to locate yourself.

By the 14th chapter of John's Gospel we are very near the final days of Jesus life, and we start to hear of conversations in which Jesus has begun preparing the disciples for his death. As was often the case with those first disciples (and is probably the way with most of us today as well), the disciples do not ask: 'What will this event do to you, Jesus?' rather they ask: 'What is going to happen to us?' Jesus responds with those famous words: Do not let your hearts be troubled... I am going ahead to prepare a place for you....

"Do not let your hearts be troubled" is the kind of advice I normally find hard to endure. Life is troubling. Sometimes it is crushing. "Do not let your hearts be troubled" can seem trite. Here, however, the speaker of those words is Jesus the Lord.

Jesus had devoted his life to giving a place to those who had no place; a place at his table, a place among his friends, a place at his feet. Tax collectors and sinners ate with him. Women were invited to break tradition and sit at his feet - and learn from his teaching. A Samaritan is the hero of one of his best known stories. Shortly before his death he stayed at the home of a man named Simon the Leper. Hopefully his response to Thomas will therefore have come as no surprise.

There was an inspiring openness to the way Jesus lived. We can receive his words with confidence. In this man's Father's house, there are many rooms. Live in hope. The present will yield to the future - because he will see to it. In life and in death your abiding home is with God; To Him and to His kingdom, we truly belong.

This is a beautiful reading for a funeral service, and it is often used there. It is also a wonderful reading for a baptism service, for baptism is all about knowing where and to whom we belong.

When Jesus then says to his disciples "And you know the way to the place where I am going", Thomas responds, probably on behalf of all present, with uncertainty. "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way." And Jesus says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." ...One of the most famous and contentious of all verses. Are all other approaches to God eliminated? It is a tricky question and, precisely for that reason, one we shouldn't avoid. There will be a mix of views among us, but let me say a few words.

Firstly, it is significant that John alone among the four Gospels records Jesus as having made this statement. Matthew, Mark and Luke have no record of Jesus speaking of himself as an exclusive path to God.

Secondly, we need to understand the circumstances of John's day. The two major concerns of John's Gospel are to encourage faith in Jesus, the Son of God, and to discredit the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. This is so because by the year 90AD, the approximate year when the Gospel was written, the Christians were in 'competition' with Judaism for followers. The followers of Jesus had been expelled from the Synagogues, and Christianity was finding its own way as a new faith. Was John's inclusion of the "No one comes to the Father except through me" statement a reflection of this bitter, 'competitive' context? It certainly was bitter and competitive at that time. Or do we have here an unbending statement of God's truth - none but those who confess Jesus will see God?

The final point I want to make may seem like "sitting on the fence" but actually I think it is biblically sound. If you were asked to name the two or three most distinctive things about the life of Jesus, one of them would have to be that he was one of the great breakers of boundaries of all time! There are so many examples: Jews and Gentiles Women and men the righteous and the sinner the 'clean' and the 'unclean', and he was renown for breaking Jewish law for the sake of outsiders, that is, for the sake of those considered outside the community of God's people.

So I think we are called to ask: Is Jesus hoping to overcome some of our present-day boundaries too?

At the very least, we need to ponder these questions, and respond with humility. I do not presume to have all the answers, but God's plans may be much greater than we know. And if Jesus the great boundary breaker is any witness, God may be at work in ways that reach well beyond our present religious boundaries.

Having said that, Jesus Christ truly is good news, and that news is for sharing. The church must always be evangelical in spirit because we are convinced that in the story of Jesus we possess a peculiar treasure.

The Church knows with confidence that following Jesus will lead us into God's way, and God's truth, and God's life. We therefore should proclaim Jesus, the son of God, his death and his resurrection, to whoever is willing to listen; including, respectfully, to people of other faiths. And we should trust in the fact that, in the final analysis, God is equal to any dilemma we may think exists in the reality that humankind is a mix of different faiths, and no faith at all. We can leave the working out of that conundrum to God, confident that those are much safer hands than ours. In my Father's house there are many rooms, if it were not so would I have said that I am going to prepare a place for you.

May God bless us with understanding as we wrestle together with these important questions for our world and the Church. Amen.