

## Easter 5 – Sermon – 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 - DT

Readings: John 14: 1-14 & Acts 7: 55-60

**Theme: “Hope in what sometimes seems a dark world”**

### Introduction

Today’s readings are really well known, the Gospel used in many funeral services and the stoning of Stephen, a memorable Sunday School lesson on the cost of following Jesus. Even the couple of verses from 1 Peter 2: 9-10 remind us that we are the chosen people of God and as such we are called out of our darkness and into the light.

Even with the theme of death running through these passages they are not morbid but rather full of hope in the midst of what could be perceived as hopelessness.

Hence I want us to reflect on the hope offered in both the Gospel and the Acts passages.

### Reflection

I have used the words of John 14 in probably hundreds of funerals over the years but two funerals stick in my mind when-ever I read these words again.

The first was when I ministered in the Le Fevre Peninsula Parish down beyond Pt Adelaide and the local funeral director rang me and said, ‘David, will you help us with a pauper’s funeral’. It is not very often that today in Australia you hear the word pauper – some-one who has died that has nothing at all and the government covers the cost of a basic funeral. This has been my only ‘pauper’s funeral’ in more than 33 years of ministry. Naturally I said “Yes.” The funeral director said it will probably be only you and ourselves but we have put a note in the local Pt Adelaide paper.

I knew nothing about this individual nor did the funeral director so I had prepared little for the service which was a grave-side affair.

When I turned up about ten minutes before the appointed hour there were about ten other people present. As we began the little service there were probably forty or so people gathered around the graveside. I suddenly felt very inadequate for the task and was wondering what to do.

We had the opening prayers, the welcome to people and I read John 14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many 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.”

I thought ‘In my Father’s house are many places.’ I had not expected any-one at the funeral, yet here are a whole bunch of people and here I am as a Christian minister offering the hope of spiritual shelter to some-one, who in life lived rough with no real shelter. Yet God, through Christ offers so much and here are others who knew this man and have turned up ‘to send him on his way’ so to speak.

In the place of the eulogy I opened up the service to those who had come to remember this man we will call ‘Tom’.

The stories were amazing about Tom, his kindness, his love for a chat, his struggle with depression which had led him to ‘going on the road’ and leaving behind his previous life. He became a real person as we heard the stories of those who had known him. These shared accounts took more than half an hour before we committed Tom into God’s everlasting care. I was sure that there was a special ‘place’ for Tom in God’s house by the time we had finished that service.

It also taught me not to prejudge a situation but to allow God to use that opportunity.

The second story happened out of a tragedy in Queanbeyan.

I can’t remember the actual date but it was about 12 years ago. Through sharing with offering meals and other services to about forty – fifty people a day I had got to know ‘Jim’. He was a regular client at St Benedicts where we offered these meals. Unfortunately there was a fight in the ‘top pub’ and he was knifed to death. One of his mates was also a regular and asked if we could have a memorial service for Jim before our meal the following week because Jim had been returned to Queensland which was his ‘home’ and his friends hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye. With some trepidation, wondering what would happen, the Catholic priest and I had a little service planned thinking just a few friends would turn up. Again, thirty- forty came and shared in this service and quite a number shared their experiences of Jim. It was a rough and motley crew that saw Jim off but again it reminded me that there is a place for all in ‘our Father’s house’.

Why these two stories? Well sometimes as Christians we think we have a mortgage on God’s house and only people like ourselves are part of it. I suggest that is a very narrow and bigoted position and is not what Jesus was talking about.

Also we do not fully understand all of what Jesus was talking about, a little like the disciples. Hence we need to be careful not to take a totally closed view to Jesus’ words “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Again bigotry came to the fore as Stephen spoke of his faith but others couldn't accept it – their response was to stone him. This narrowness of faith is still apparent where stoning happens with Christians, Hindus and Muslims to this day in various parts of the world. How incredibly sad that people do not see the breadth of Jesus' teaching which states "In my Father's house are many rooms" for us to come to be in.

### Conclusion

May we, as we reflect upon the passages for today from the Lectionary, see the need to have dialogue both with other Christians as well as with those of other faith groups. We can still hold our beliefs, but be open to discussion with others and allow God's Holy Spirit to work in that sharing.

This is a tension, but one we should not shirk away from just because it may be a little difficult and challenging!