Sermon Easter 5A Greater Things

10th May 2020

Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

One concern many Christians in this society share is about a decline in biblical literacy, as New Zealand becomes a more secular society Bible stories, which were once well known even by people who did not go to Church are less and less known. And inasmuch as the Churches seek to reach out to the wider community , be that to encourage faith or to contribute to public debate this makes our task harder.

For myself though, as someone who preaches week by week – even from my bubble – I find the bigger problem isn’t the unfamiliarity of the wider community with our sacred texts, it’s our own overfamiliarity. We think we know certain stories and sayings so well. Many of you reading this could, without opening your Bibles tell a pretty full version say of the story of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. The risk of such familiarity is we become closed to the power of the text, it no longer surprises us. It becomes comfortable and familiar, like a pair of old slippers. But there comes a point where a pair of old slippers can cause us to stumble.

Today’s Gospel, or at least the first part of it, feels deeply familiar.

You will probably have it many times, and where have you heard it? Context – after all – is everything.

Rather like Psalm 23, which we heard last week, this is a text you will have heard many times at funerals.

“*In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places*,” I have to say the KJV’s “*many mansions* “ has a certain elegance to it.

We read it, we hear it, as about an assurance of life beyond our dying. That we too will share in the Resurrection. I would take nothing from that but if that is all we hear then we miss out.

We are invited into the Resurrection not after our dying but here, now, in the very midst of our living.

Thomas says in the text “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” Coming towards the end of Eastertime and to our remembering of the Ascension of Jesus we see here an allusion to a time when the Risen Jesus is no longer seen, mysterious that those sightings are, and his followers enter into something new.

But while Jesus will soon no longer be seen he does not go away.

He speaks to the anxiety of his followers, where are we going, what happens now, how will we know? Look at how he responds to Phillip, who asks that Jesus might show them the Father. He reminds him that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Here we see the community the *Gospel of John* was written for reflecting on the ways in which the life of this man Jesus made present, embodied, the life of God.

This was not a radical departure, look at our reading from Acts. Here Stephen is being put to death for enraging the religious authorities, the Sanhedrin. Just before this he had recounted the history of the Jewish people as providential; charged with the Ruach or Spirit of God and in every generation challenging the people “do you cooperate, or do you resist?”

If God had been present in the history of the Jewish people then in the Gospel God is specifically, uniquely present in the life of Jesus, yet Jesus today tells us that is not the end of the story. That God will be present in the community gathered around him.

As he embodied, as he made present so must we.

“ … *the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact will do greater works than these*.”

 He then goes on to say that he is going to the Father and that anything we ask in his name will be granted. That second point explains why Christian prayers generally end with an invoking of the name of Jesus. That is – for a liturgical scholar – a fascinating window into the development of Christian prayer but it is the first point I find striking.

How are we to understand it and embody it? How are we to live it out?

We have become accustomed in Western Christianity – in the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions – to reading “believe in me” as about getting our theology and doctrine right. I do not wish to diminish that, what we believe isn’t incidental or insignificant. What we believe is carried out in our choices, our actions and inactions.

Some early Christians believed that Jesus was divine but in no sense human,that what appeared to be the man Jesus was an artifice, a shell, one of God’s theatrical props. This reflected a Greek philosophical tradition in which matter, flesh, the stuff of the world were tainted, impure, worth less than the archetype or idea of a thing. Often elements have that have crept into Christian thought and spirituality from time to time; with harmful effects because when we believe this way we act in ways which diminish our humanity and our world.

You might think this is all very interesting but where is he going with this? Christianity – or the greater part of it – came to an understanding of Jesus as both fully human and truly Divine. A genuinely “orthodox” theology has to take the former part as seriously as the latter. Yet we struggle again and again to do this.

But here’s the thing, the initial meaning of “believe in” wasn’t about getting doctrine right, it was about trust. Trusting in the power of the story of Jesus, trusting that if you hand over your life to this. If you live your life in this way it will take you to where you need to be.

Today we are called again to commit ourselves to the power of the story, to trust it, to know the power of it. And in doing so we find the space prepared for us, not just for after this life is done but for today, for now.

We find the Resurrection

Amen