

Sunday 22nd April 2018
Easter 4 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 4.5-12

NT: I John 3.16-end

G: John 10.11-18

We have rather powerful texts today that form the source for our Classic Christian conviction that in Jesus Christ we encounter the truth! Not accepting that truth has consequences, our readings suggest. In the first reading, Peter says: 'This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else'. In the first letter of John, we read this: "This is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another just as he commanded us".

There are various voices and objections to these claims in our modern world. There are those who say that it's difficult to make such claims about Jesus when there are all sorts of people who have never heard of him, or have not understood him, or those who have come before Jesus. Does this mean we can speak against anyone who disagrees with us? Wasn't this used to justify colonialism and the crusades? Doesn't this make God unjust and our mission inhuman? After all, Jesus had a context 2000 years ago. How could that possibly be relevant for all times and places? How can we commend our faith in a society where people not only belong to different faiths, but also have varied lifestyles? These are serious questions, which makes it incumbent upon us to understand well what we are about, why is it that we claim what we claim to be the truth?

Why did Peter speak the way he did in the first lesson? The first thing we need to remember is that he was not speaking to Chinese people who have never heard or known Jesus. Peter was addressing an audience who have just been involved and witnessed the

execution of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross, an execution we have no reason to doubt its historical truth. Therefore, he says to those who have been involved in the trial and death of Christ: if you want to have grace, if you want to have life, you need to face the one that you rejected. There is no name to save **you** except the name of Jesus whom you crucified'. Emphasis on 'you' who are part of the drama.

But, why is it that you can face this Jesus? Because he is risen! He is not risen to revenge your killing. He is risen as your hope! In order to receive that hope and that grace, you need to face your victim. There is nothing abstract or general in this statement in its context. And like Peter's audience, we too have our own victims. Jesus' life has made us rethink what we mean by God and what we mean by human beings. When goodness and truth come among us, the habitual human response is to reject it, because it challenges our norms and our systems. This is not just a problem for Jesus' day. We have just remembered the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King in the USA, a miniscule example of what we remember in Jesus and how humans react to truth.

Therefore, the foundation of everything Christians say and do lies in what we have heard at the beginning of our second lesson from I John: "We know love by this that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another". The life of the Christian faith is about laying down our lives so that life may happen.

And so to our Gospel reading; the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is not simply a picturesque scene. The Good Shepherd is the one who answers for the lives of the sheep, which puts his own security at risk, we are told. Even more, this Good Shepherd doesn't only answer for those visible sheep. The Gospel tells us that he has 'other sheep' that do not belong to the fold. He does not fence around. He accepts that he is there to answer for everyone with equal cost and equal love.

So why are we Christians then? We are not Christians because everything is clear and we know always what to do and what not to do, or because we have the right answers to everything. We are Christians because we have come to realise that God's own life, buried and shared is an uncontainable gift to all of us and it has kindled lives all over the world. And we face Jesus as the truth in this life, not as a distant figure whose example we simply follow but someone whose life is kindled in us, for he is risen and he is present in Baptism and in the Eucharist.

And it is important to remember that this claim is as bold today as it would have been to the hearers or Peter's context in the Acts of the Apostles.

I have just come back from the Holy Land where Christians have celebrated Easter in the very Church of the crucifixion and Resurrection in the Old City of Jerusalem. Some of you may have visited there. A great deal of Western visitors are disappointed by what an apparently appalling mess it is. They expect a glorious artistic building to celebrate God's triumphant grace; instead, they find several levels of chapels, caves, weird corners all built around one big rock. That is the rock on which our faith is founded, a rock of caves and hollow corners; for it's in these hollow corners that life begins, a bit of a dark womb for new life to kindle. It's not a bad image for the Church. Beneath the surface, there are broken lives that broke open where growth is going on, where newness is to be found, where 'other sheep' are found by the Good Shepherd.

Now, Liverpool Parish Church is not exactly like the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. But, the church that we see here, this light and radiant sanctuary rests upon that network of past caves, corners and building where lives broke open and growth happened. This is what every church should be like. Behind what we see, there are among us broken

lives that come for healing here, lives that have been broken by suffering, who come to face Jesus here.

And what we celebrate in this Eucharist is the Jesus Christ who has taken our sin and our suffering, who has made himself responsible for its healing. Of that fullness we receive in Holy Communion that fullness of life which gives us the freedom and the courage to make answer for another, and in the light of the recent discussions on the Windrush generation here, to think with repentance and shame of those episodes in our history where we have failed to make answer for the lives of others.

We are here to renew our promise to be with the Good Shepherd and to answer for the lives of others, friend or stranger, insider or outsider. May we grow in this fellowship with the Good Shepherd that he might sustain, enlarge and inspire this Church for years to come with that vision and Jesus will be seen here at the altar and hour by hour.

Fr Yazid Said