

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, 7 May 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Vicar

In the Name of the One who is our Way, our Truth, and our Life. Amen.

We are continuing our Eastertide of inspiring readings. We began with Stephen, recorded as the first Deacon, as well as the first among Jesus' followers to be martyred. The order of deacons is understood by the church as a sacrament of servant leadership, a model for all of us of how to live as true followers of Christ by serving others. Here Stephen is living out this calling in his death, clearly seen as a reflection of Jesus' own death, echoing Jesus' forgiveness from the cross of those who killed him. Stephen remains for us a model of living and serving as Jesus did, with the Holy Spirit giving us the strength and wisdom to do so – and sometimes, like Stephen, the 'inspiration' to speak our experience aloud.

The Psalmist reminds us to take refuge in God, no matter how hard things get, immediately followed by Peter sounding like a modern motivational speaker, "We can do it. Yes, the task is hard, but it has been given us by God along with the strength and wisdom to perform it."

Then we come to the Gospel text so often used at funerals – as recently as yesterday here at Saint Aidan's. They are definitely comforting words: there is room for us; Christ is making a place for us; we will not be alone or left behind; we know the way – and our friend Thomas asks the very reasonable question, "How can we know the way?" and receives the famous answer, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life".

Thomas' question is one many of us have asked, 'How can we know the way?' Some people in all times and places like to think they have the one and only way which they want to impose on everyone else. But Jesus tells Thomas (and us) that it's all in the relationship – and relationships vary. Christ is the way. God's gift of Godself in the creation, in the incarnation, in the self-offering of the crucifixion, in the resurrection, in the continual gift of God's Spirit in the life of the world. This is the Way and how we each engage it varies. My way may look very different from yours and yet both of us be entirely faithful to Christ.

It is all the same and yet different. It is all in relationship, among the persons of the Trinity and among us and us with the Trinity, dynamic relationship.

One of the most famous reflections on this passage is an inspiring poem by the lovely 17th century English priest and poet, George Herbert. Herbert only lived 39 years, yet his influence has been out of all proportion to that short life. His poetry was instrumental in drawing the atheist CS Lewis into relationship with God in Christ, and has similarly helped many to find their way to knowledge of God. In this particular poem (now a hymn in our hymnal), Herbert is reflecting on the words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel and that we hear also in the Collect.

He takes those words about Christ being 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life' and pushes for content and meaning – and relationship. As we all live our lives hoping for that kind of relationship which can be called truly *knowing* God, I recommend as a spiritual exercise trying to write our own poems or essays or letters or random strings of thoughts. Herbert wrote:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;
such a truth as ends all strife;
such a life as killeth death.

and then goes on to fill it out with Come, my light, feast, strength, joy, love, and heart.

Herbert takes Jesus' words and reflects on them in a hopeful, heartfelt way. He was a privileged and accomplished man, with a career in Oxford and promise of prominence in Parliament, but as political winds changed, he chose to withdraw to the life of a country parson, devoting his personal wealth and great talents to the wellbeing of the souls entrusted to him. During his few short years as a much beloved parson, he wrote many poems which have inspired faithful and struggling people ever since. At the Offertory we will hear another poem reflecting on those words by the great 20th century poet WH Auden. They are both on today's handout along with a challenge to explore these words for yourselves.

How would you describe how Jesus is the Way and Truth and Life for you? – and what might you add to the list of nouns? Would you use the same ones Herbert used – or very different ones?

This journey of life, seeking to know God perfectly, is a mystery and an adventure – and like all relationships is enhanced by exploration, whether we are poets or not.

Jesus lived among us as one of us and yet still divine. Jesus shows us the image of a true human being, who lives in the image of God and in full communion with God, and so is truly the way to God, the truth of God, and the life of God for all of us. Just like poetry, stories of life lived as Christ's people help to expand my understanding of this reality.

As I was thinking about this, I recalled two experiences shared by other priests many years ago. Both have to do with young people with slower minds than their peers in the parish. In the first instance, the adults of the parish insisted on their tradition that young people could only be confirmed, and thus only receive communion, after they had completed a proper confirmation course in Church history and doctrine. They explained to the new priest that one of their young people did not receive communion because he was mentally retarded and so could never properly understand the meaning of the sacrament. The young man always came to the rail with his family and received a blessing like the younger children. One Sunday the priest heard the young man say to his mother, as they got up from the rail, "Mama, how come I receive my blessing on my head instead of in my hand like everyone else?" The priest was struck by the understanding in his heart, although his mind might not be so quick as his fellows'. So the priest explained to the adults why he felt it entirely appropriate to include this young man in the communion of the faithful. This young man had a clear relationship with Jesus, the Way and the Truth and the Life.

Another priest friend told a story that lives at the heart of my sense of Easter. He spoke about teaching a Sunday school class made up of fourth and fifth graders, most of whom went to school together and were very quick learners, proud of their cleverness. But among them was a sickly young man named Philip who had several birth defects causing him to both move more slowly than his peers, and to think more slowly as well. He often had to miss school and often misunderstood things that were easily clear to everyone else. The other children were very impatient with Philip's slowness.

At Easter, their class made different symbols of the resurrection and enclosed them in plastic Easter eggs which they placed on the altar during the service. When Philip brought his forward, it was empty, and the other children all groaned at his apparent ignorance. Later, his teacher asked him why there was nothing in his egg, no butterfly or any of the other Easter symbols they had discussed. Philip looked at the teacher with surprise and said, "It was the empty tomb. Jesus wasn't there anymore." The whole class was embarrassed at their own lack of understanding, assuming that Philip was always wrong, that Philip understood nothing.

The rest of the year was very different, as they all came to value Philip's unique experience and unique reflections on God, knowing that his own life was destined to be very short. He became bedridden that summer and died early the next year. His classmates came to his funeral and each one brought an empty plastic egg to put in his grave.

There are indeed many dwelling places, many spots that need just the right odd-shaped stone to make the building complete.

Our participation in the resurrection life is secured by God's love for us, not by our own cleverness or worthiness. When we realize this, we can begin to look at ourselves and those around us without judgment and fear, looking to Jesus and seeing there the loving face of God and the pattern for our own lives as living stones destined to be built into the house of God, built by God for the shelter and enlightenment of all creation.

Let us pray: Most gracious and glorious God, thank you for giving us Jesus, the pattern and perfecter of our faith; help us to walk in Jesus' footsteps and see with Jesus' eyes that we may truly know and follow the Way and the Truth and the Life, and that we may each find our unique dwelling place with you, now and forever. Amen.