

Sermon, Easter 5

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...Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

I

In John's Gospel today, we hear something we have heard before: the doubting Thomas! Doubting again, and wondering "Lord, we do not know where you are going. **How can we know the way?**"

Thomas reminds me of children in a car on a journey, frequently asking "Are we there yet?" Thomas **should** know that Christ will show us the way. Our children **should** know that we are travelling as fast as possible, but it takes time. Thomas – the one who needed to touch the wounds of Christ – needs evidence, he needs direction – but I think he speaks for many of us.

In the Anglican tradition, this Sunday is called "Rogation Sunday." The word comes from the Latin verb "to ask" – from which we also get "interrogation"! But it is a day to ask questions.

How can we know the way?

Good question! We are probably all asking ourselves this from time to time. What are we allowed to do? What should we do?

What will keep us safe? There is plenty of room for doubt and uncertainty in our COVID-19 lives!

Theologian David Curry wrote that:

The things which Jesus does are the works which reveal that “I am... the way, the truth and the life”. And how are we to participate in that? Through prayer.... All prayer is about nothing less and nothing more than asking the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit. All prayer gathers us into the fundamental orientation of the Son, “**because I go unto my Father.**” Here again, and providentially, we have the recurring Easter refrain, “because I go to the Father.” Everything is rooted and grounded in the life of God, the holy and blessed Trinity.”

Fr Curry also says that today’s Gospel:

...is part of Jesus’ so-called “farewell discourse” in John’s Gospel.... It presents one of the most ... challenging and ... controversial ... of Jesus’ ,... “I am” sayings....

Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

Well, **that** is pretty straightforward.... But we **all** want details, reassurance, knowing what tomorrow brings.... In Peter’s Epistle today, we are, “Like newborn infants, (who) long for the pure, spiritual milk” – we **want** to be hand-fed and reassured.

Absolute trust – a leap of faith – is challenging. Spiritual maturity isn’t the same as physical maturity. We have all met some incredibly spiritually mature children, and some **very**

immature elders – haven't we? We can all be like Thomas, crying out for quick and easy answers.

II

Thomas is subtly contrasted in our readings against St. Stephen, our first martyr. Stephen is described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit”. Set apart by prayer and the laying-on of hands, he is considered to be the first deacon. And this is a tradition – literally a “handing-down” – that comes from when Christ laid his own hands on his Apostles. Everyone within our “threefold ministry” who receives this responsibility was touched by someone – who, however indirectly – was touched by Jesus.

Stephen wasn't about doubt and uncertainty. He did what was necessary; he spoke up in the Jewish Temple, and he was condemned for blasphemy. He knew what was important and didn't worry about the results of his actions. He was confident that Jesus would prepare a dwelling for him in his Father's house.

And so, “they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.” He was the first martyr – but certainly not the last.

So – the Church was – and continues to be – built on our suffering. Everyone who sacrifices – or is sacrificed – for the church, becomes a stone in the building of a greater Temple.

Not the Temple of Jerusalem, that was destroyed – but an institution whose stones are human sacrifices – martyrs – for

Christ's teachings. And thus it is not a Church of stone – it is a Church of people and of souls!

III

We have heard a lot about deserts in our readings. So – whatever else ancient Judea was – it was certainly **not** without lots of stone and rock.

So, if last week's sermon was all about sheep, this week is all about stone. Our readings started with Stephen's death by stoning. Our Psalm talks about "...my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe." Our Epistle says, "Come to him, a living stone... chosen and precious in God's sight."

How can we know the way?

We have also talked about paths **through** the desert. And here there are also the rocks that trip us up, or that cut our feet. Rocky places do not easily support life.

I have talked about T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* in previous sermons – he writes **about**:

mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
...
If there were only water amongst the rock
...
But there is no water.

So, there is no water. T.S. Eliot was fascinated by the symbolism of Christ's death and resurrection. He was writing about Baptism and salvation.

And isn't this typical of our condition? We have lots of rocks in our lives, and not enough water. The rocks that we **encounter** are too **many** to support life, and too **few** to build a house. But, quite enough to murder someone.

Eliot later talks about "the agony in stony places." It was in such a stony place that Christ was crucified.

We also heard, in our Epistle, the Old Testament prophecy that, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner". Cornerstones are key structural parts of a foundation – and the stones of a foundation **must** be good, so that others can be laid upon them. And this is why stones are important!

While Judea had lots of stone, not all of it was good for building. And so, perhaps, the rejected stones would be piled up outside the city.... So, when "they dragged [Stephen] out of the city" – were those the stones that killed him? (What else would you use "rejected" stones for?)

But just as the Cross – a means of death for the lowest of offenders against Rome – becomes the triumphant symbol of resurrection, the stones that killed St Stephen become the cornerstones of the Church.

How can we know the way?

One of the traditions of Rogation Sunday was walking the Parish boundaries: “beating the bounds”. This was perhaps a nice tradition for a spring day. And – I think – the Provincial authorities would actually now allow us to do it, as long as we observe “social distancing”!

Our Parish is actually pretty big, and would take a bit of time to walk. You cross into it when you cross Wooden’s River bridge. And you would have to walk through Glen Margaret, Hackett’s Cove, Indian Harbour, Peggy’s Cove, The Dovers, McGrath’s Cove, Blind Bay and Bayside, before exiting across Nine Mile River. And that is just sticking to the main road!

And, thanks to the glaciers and the Ice Age, you will certainly come across a lot of stone! Here, more than anywhere, we know about the enduring nature of stone.

We make our mark on the stone – and the stone makes it mark upon us. Let’s think back on those stones that killed St Stephen. We don’t know where they are – if we did, maybe they would be venerated as relics! But we can be pretty sure they still exist.

They could be part of a road, or a building.... But do they not still bear the blood of St Stephen? Over twenty years ago, 229 people died when the Swissair flight crashed in the waters off Peggy’s Cove. Can we really claim that those rocks are the same as they were before? Are **we** the same?

And so we look at our gospel, where we are told to “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places”. These words of Christ are so special that they are often recited at the offices for the sick and dying. In some ways, I prefer the older translation: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.”

The word “mansion” itself derives from the Latin word *mansion*, "dwelling", derived from the verb "to dwell" or “to **remain**”. The word *manse* originally defined a property large enough for a parish priest to sustain their “living”. “Manor” comes from the same root – land granted to someone who could "remain" there.

The word “mansion” did not always mean a large and ostentatious building – it suggests a **permanent** dwelling. The word became associated with luxury, when the poor did not always live in permanent structures! But a **permanent** dwelling is what God offers us as the gift of eternal life!

Back in the winter, I spoke about my pilgrimage to the Scottish island of Iona, where St Columba is believed to have landed, to bring the Word of God from Ireland to Britain. Another stony place. Those rocks became where Columba and his followers built a **permanent** community of faith, that endures to today!

And so the stone – the stone that killed St Stephen – is become the cornerstone of our Church – and a symbol of the home that Christ has gone ahead to build for us!

But we are still wandering among the rocks, looking for water. It is very reassuring to know that this home exists - but how to get there?

How can we know the way?

We have both the Stephens and the Thomases in our congregational life. There are those who lead by example like Stephen, and those like Thomas who ask for redirection and clarification.

So.... how do we reconcile the stones that killed St Stephen... the stones that the builders rejected, and that became a foundation... and the many dwellings that exist in the world to come?

V

Our Gospel says:

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. **How can we know the way?**” Jesus said to him, “I **am** the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.

The way.

The truth.

The life.

We need to follow in his **way**. It is a stony way. But those stones are the cornerstone of Christ’s Church here on earth. And we must work together to build that Church.

We need to accept his **truth**. This includes all his teachings, but most of all his distillation of the Two Great Commandments: to love God, and to love each other.

We need to ask ourselves will you be the rock on which those who are trying to do Christ work will stumble or will you be the rock that supports Christ the cornerstone?

We need to live his **life**. In faith, hope and love, we need to do what Christ asks us to. We may not need to face the sacrifice of St Stephen – but we need to follow in Christ's footsteps, wherever they may lead. Eventually, they will take us home.

And if we come, through him, then we will come to our Father. And the rough stones that we have stumbled over – the sharp stones that we have had thrown at us – the heavy stones that we have carried – all the stones that we have endured – will become the sure foundation for our place in Heaven.

Amen.