

Sermon for Sunday, the 18th of May, 2014 - St Mary's Kidlington  
- On seeing the Father in the Son

Readings: Acts 7:55-60 Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 1 Peter 2:2-10 John 14:1-14

Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What do we really believe about God? That's the question I have for us today. For me, for you, for all of us. What do we really believe about God? Do we really believe in God? Do we really trust God? What do we really believe God is like? If we had to answer these questions honestly, what would the bare, honest truth be? What does it even really mean to believe?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus responds to a series of statements from two of his disciples. First of all, we should probably set the scene. Imagine a big room on the night of a major festival. Lots of people, lots of food, lots of wine. People laughing, singing, chatting. There is a bit of tension in the air as several of the party guests have had run in's with the local authorities over the past week. Then the guest of honour starts behaving rather oddly. He gets down from the table and starts behaving like a servant. He washes the feet of everyone at the party and then afterwards starts a conversation that sounds as if he's saying goodbye. Our gospel reading today begins in the middle of a conversation.

Jesus is still at table with his disciples on the night before he dies. He predicts his betrayal by Judas and then commands those who follow him that they should imitate him, that they should do as he has done. He tells them to love one another as he loves them and then tells Peter that he also is going to betray him.

It's probably safe to assume that by this point in the conversation the mood of the party has grown pretty sombre. Jesus has already been telling people since they started their journey to Jerusalem that he is going to be handed over to the authorities and killed. Now he is telling his friends that he's going away.

The atmosphere must have been very quiet. Confused, shocked, afraid. These people at the party have followed him, have learnt from him, have trusted their lives to him. Now it sounds as if he's saying goodbye. Now what? What chance have they got?

What do you do when you're not sure? When you're like Thomas, Philip and the other disciples. When you have doubts?

In the play "Doubt" by John Patrick Shanley, there is a story told that I would like to share with you.

"A cargo ship sank. It caught fire, went down. Only one sailor survived. He found a life boat, rigged a sail, and being of a nautical discipline, looked to the stars and set his course for home. And exhausted, he fell asleep. Clouds rolled in. For three weeks he could not see the stars. He thought he was on course. But he could no longer be certain. And he began to have doubts. Was he on the right, was he on his way home. Or was he hopelessly lost. Was he doomed to die a terrible, lonely death. No way to know. Had he judged the stars correctly? Had he seen what he wanted to see in his desperation? Or had he seen truth once and now had to hold onto it without any further reassurance?

There are many amongst us today, if not all of us, who know this crisis of faith. When you doubt, when you feel lost, you are not alone."

God comes to us, even when we doubt. For what Jesus is saying here is not really about some sort of certainty. You here lots of people bang on about “what they know” or how certain they are. He's asking them to trust him. Jesus says believe. It's different. Faith isn't about signing up to a set of doctrines and rules. Faith is a journey. Faith is an adventure. Faith is trusting. Faith is trust.

St Stephen trusts in Christ with all that he is and knows that Christ is with him even at the moment of a horrific death. He believes in Christ and, like so many throughout the world even today, dies because he does.

Jesus on the very night he is betrayed, the night before he is put to death, is right there with his disciples, even amongst their confusion, grief and fear. Right in the middle of their uncertainties. “I am the way and the truth and the life” he says. “Thomas, if you know me, you will also know the Father.”

Philip goes on to ask Jesus to show them the Father. Here's the real rub of the text. “We want to see God, Jesus. So show us.” His response is simple. “Philip, if you've seen me, you have seen God.”

Now, whether we have our doubts or whether we have faith, everyone has an idea of what they think God is like. Even people who say they do not believe in God, have some idea of exactly what the God they say they don't believe in is like.

So many, in so many places, have ideas of God that appear and sound nothing like that which appears in our Gospel story today.

So what do we really believe God is like? Is God an angry white man with beard eager to throw lightning bolts and lock up people in Hell? Or is God someone we can pull out of pocket whenever we need assistance and then pop back when we're done? Or God is someone removed from us completely dwelling on high far away that God doesn't actually care about us at all, others things to run you know? What is it that we really believe? Is it something we could honestly say we trust? Something that we could say is rock and fortress for us? Is it something that has anything to do with Jesus at all.

The good news to us is that Christ is the image of the invisible God. If we want to know what God is really like, all we have to do is look at Jesus. As it says at the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews: “He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.” The true image of the Father is the Son. The only way to see God is in the crucified and risen Christ. So many times when people talk about God, even Christians, the Father becomes something that looks nothing like the Son. All of this completely ignores what Jesus is saying here to Philip: “If you have seen me Philip, then you have seen the Father.”

The one who gets down and washes the feet of those at table with him, the one who tells them that if they want to follow him, if they want to be like him, then they have to love one another as he loves them – that's the one who shows us what God is like.

We might reflect on the words of the late, great Michael Ramsey once said that “God is Christ-like, in whom there is no un-Christ-likeness at all.”

So no matter what stage of the journey you are on

- no matter if this is all very new to you, or all too familiar

- no matter if you feel like things are going well in your spiritual life or honestly going a bit poorly

- no matter if you gave up for a while and are just getting back on your feet or you feel as if you're walking or even running again  
- no matter what stage of the journey you're on, I hope that today's readings might come as some encouragement. I hope that we might all have encouragement to believe, to trust, and to say that we too have "tasted that the Lord is good."  
That even in the midst of fear, doubt and darkness, God is amongst his friends telling them that the journey they're on is one that is leading them home.  
That God never abandons us in life or death.  
That the one whom we can trust is there by our side through thick and thin.  
That Jesus shows us what God is really like.  
That ultimately, we are loved, we are forgiven, that we are found, and that we are never forgotten.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

by Fr. Luke Hopkins