

I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14: 6)

A sermon preached May 10th 2020 for the 75th Anniversary of VE Day

On Friday, V.E. day, we put up bunting, made a cup of tea and had a virtual 'big picnic' together. We shared stories of our parents and grandparents' experience of the war. Two people mentioned relations who had been military chaplains. Chaplains showed extraordinary courage in the war. They went into battle - but without weapons. They prepared men spiritually before battle, accompanied them into action, prayed with the injured, and dying and conducted funerals. In many ways they were living examples of the accompanying, servant ministry of Jesus

Our Gospel reading is set in the night before Jesus' death. Jesus is trying to prepare them for his death and for what their task will be after his death - preaching the news of the kingdom, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This passage is often used at funerals and it is very powerful because it demonstrates Jesus' serious concern for our life with him. It speaks of Jesus going to prepare a place for us and returning for us - 'So that where I am,' he says, 'You may be also.'

There is a tendency for our secular society to put off a serious consideration of death, particularly if we are healthy and relatively secure. We down-play it as something that won't happen for long time. As Woody Allen joked, 'I'm not worried about death - I just don't want to be there when it happens.' But the current pandemic cuts through that 'distancing' of death. Newspaper reports of young, healthy people succumbing to viral infection make clear to everyone what Christians have always known – 'In the midst of life we are in death.'

Not only that, but The VE day celebrations reminded us of the sacrifices members of the armed forces and civilians both in this country and all over the world made for the cause of freedom. As a community we recognise that some things are worth giving our lives for and we remember with gratitude and respect those who paid the ultimate price. BUT there were also forces at work in the 1940s in Germany that led good people to give their lives in the service of a corrupt and murderous regime. Even senior members of the German church accepted racist and genocidal propaganda as truth.

What we give our lives for matters. The path we choose to walk, the decisions we take, matter. How can we live worthwhile lives up to and including our deaths based on truth and love not lies and error? As Jesus talked with the disciples, the night before he died, trying to prepare them for life after his death, Thomas became exasperated. 'We don't know where you're going,' he said. 'How can we know the way?' 'I am the way the truth and I am life.' Jesus replied.

Without even knowing that he was doing so, Thomas had expressed the frustrated longing we all have for God. The sense that there is something to hope for to pray to, but we can't quite grasp what or who it is or how to reach it. Augustine of Hippo explained it like this -

The whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing -What you long for you do not yet see.... by withholding the vision, God extends the longing;
through longing God extends the soul;
by extending it he makes room in it.
So let us long, because we are to be filled.

Augustine is suggesting that our longing for God, our underlying desire to live worthwhile, meaningful lives is given to us by God. And so Jesus' answer, which seems not to answer Thomas' question actually does - because it answers Thomas' underlying longing. 'I am the way,' says Jesus because Jesus is fully human and through his humanity he can reveal the Father to Thomas and the disciples. As John writes in the

prologue to his Gospel, 'It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made the Father known.' Jesus can show the disciples and us, the way. At the same time, in his divine nature, he is the truth - the one for whom we long, the one who will lead us into all truth; and he is Life, the eternal life we are promised.

'We don't know where you are going- How can we know the way? asks Thomas. The answer is that Jesus is going to the Father and we know the way because we know him and he is the way. At the same time, he is what the Father is - life and truth. Jesus is not only the journey but also the divine destination.

Looking death in the face, Jesus calls us to life in him. Whether in war or pandemic, we can't choose the time or manner of our death, but we can choose how we live and whom we will follow. Like Stephen, the first martyr we can choose to follow the one who is the way to God, the truth of God, and who is eternal life with God.