

EASTER V Year A 2020

There is something very earthy and yet radiant about the passage we heard from the First Letter of Peter. We are called to *'long for the pure, spiritual milk'* – to remember that we, as brothers and sisters in Christ are - *'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that [we] may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light.'* It is amazing language, isn't it. The earthiness of our humanity connected to a divine call. Yet is this sort of language relevant in our age? The tone of it can seem somewhat alien to modern culture and particularly the situation we find ourselves in at present. Yet to me, its utter validity is its sense that our lives as Christians are held in the mercy of God - as Peter writes: *'Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.'*

That call to faith within our own lives will be different for each one of us because the pull of God is individual. Yet as Christians, faith finds its fullness in corporate belonging – we are all members of the Body of Christ, or *God's people* as Peter puts it. He talks of mercy as a vital element of understanding our Faith in Jesus Christ. Although we tend to think in human terms of mercy as a rather legalistic term, in faith it is something quite different. It is not something to be earned. Remember the Parable of the Prodigal or Lost Son, who returns home after a life of wild excess prepared to throw himself on his father's mercy. Yet when the father sees him from afar off, he rushes towards him to embrace him. There is no condemnation, no desire to even hear contrite words, although the son utters them. The father gathers his son to his bosom. This is the Mercy of God explained to us by the one whose whole life exemplifies Divine Mercy from beginning to end.

At first reading, both the passage from Acts and John's Gospel seem far removed from Peter's Letter. Neither do they seem to have much of an Eastertide message for us. We would much rather hear about Easter joy experienced on the Road to Emmaus, in the Garden of Resurrection or at that barbeque on the beach that Jesus had with his disciples. Instead, we are taken to the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and then (again) to the Last Supper. Yet we want to bask in Resurrection light, Ascension joy and the coming of the fire of Holy Spirit at Pentecost!

However, our Faith is one where, yes, we are drawn into the knowledge of those experiences, some of them revealing wondrous moments which help to form our own Christian journey, but we are also called to know that every aspect of our human experience is known to God through the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is through all these that we are then drawn through the Resurrection; into the new life of the Kingdom. Then we are to seek to continually deepen our own experience of the journey towards the heart of God's Love.

I have always found the story of Stephen profoundly moving. His call to serve as a deacon in the earliest days of the Church; that brave speech against false witnesses; the opportunity to profess the new life he found in Jesus Christ – all signs of a Spirit-led life. As he approached death, there is no sense of regret, or even the sense of inner turmoil we see Jesus experiencing in the Garden of Gethsemane, or with that cry of abandonment on the

cross we hear in the first three Gospels. Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us of Stephen's ecstatic vision of the divine glory, and the response of those who have charged him. They cover their ears. In other words, Faith is a two-way process. God is always with us – filled with mercy - but it is our own openness to the divine call within our lives which enables us to prosper spiritually. To grow faithfully involves constancy and work; Scripture, prayer, recognising and experiencing sacramental life on many fronts, and seeking to follow Jesus Christ as best we can. This is what Stephen does. He forgives those stoning him – following the example of Jesus – an outpouring of mercy on his part.

Many Christians are called to walk this sort of path every day of the year in places where persecution is rife. You won't need me to enumerate those nations or parts of the world where being a follower of Jesus Christ presents difficulties or even real danger. I was reading only yesterday of Michael Nnadi, an 18-year-old Seminarian murdered in Nigeria recently because he refused to stop preaching the Gospel to the criminal gang who abducted him. That martyrdom at the hands of his Muslim captors is no different from Stephen's. The blood of the martyrs is something we should never forget. There is a tendency to regard our Faith as a feel-good personal walk to the paradise garden – to misquote the title of a work by Delius! Remember, we are the Body of Christ, called - as Peter writes - to be fed with the spiritual milk of Faith and to become living stones of a spiritual house. It is our call to allow all to know that they too are welcome. Sometimes this call will be a task to proclaim.

I seem to have spoken a great deal this Eastertide about journeying. In our Gospel reading, the disciples too are on the same exploration of the fulness of life, yet they question or do not understand the one they have acknowledged to be the Messiah – the Anointed One.

- Thomas: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'
- Philip: 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'

The answer to both lies in the answer Jesus gives to Thomas: '*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*' There is not one of us who will be unmoved by first part of this statement, yet we might balk at the second for fear of offending those of other faiths or indeed of none. However it seems to me that if we understand the unity Jesus shares with God, ultimately revealed through selfless love on the cross – God's mercy shining even through death - then the risen Christ is present in all selfless love – because, as Paul writes, '*...for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ, but each in their own order.*' (1 Corinthians 15: 22) This is not Universalism but recognising Christ's presence in goodness. However, it is in him that we find the fullest experience of life in God.

The disciples have some way to go. They must experience the Lord's Passion and Death to be drawn into his Risen Life, opening the channel of the Holy Spirit within their lives and leading them to proclaim that Jesus is Way, the Truth and the Life. We have a head start on them. We know the end of the story – except that it is not the end, but the beginning of OUR story.

Jesus offers us all the fulness of life and the knowledge of the abiding mercy and love of God. Our response in seeking to grow in faithfulness is entirely our own choice. Will we allow ourselves to dare - through Jesus - to be continually changed into who we really are?



*Saint Stephen (Martin Travers) in St Stephen's Church, Bournemouth
(a wonderful building by John Loughborough Pearson)*

Acts 7: 55-end

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then

he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

I Peter 2: 2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation - if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and 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. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner', and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14: 1-14

Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' 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. From now on you do know him and have seen him.' Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'