

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Our Gospel Reading is John 14:1-14

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’”

I said last week that the journey sometimes shapes the destination. Jesus it seems is more concerned with the journey. Easter is full of journeys. Mary going to the tomb, the men running to the place where the body had been laid, friends meeting a stranger on the road, the fishermen going back to the lake. Some are physical journeys, other are journeys of life changing discovery. Easter leads us towards those who met behind locked doors suddenly finding themselves out in the streets. Easter itself is a journey, it is not over, we are an Easter people moving towards the coming of the Spirit.

You might think that a group trying to change the world would make the most of their key people. Yet the gospels repeatedly tell us that the disciples got it wrong. Peter denied his friend. Thomas refused to believe. God chooses to act through very imperfect people. This also is a journey. God is more interested in travelling with us than telling us where to go.

I make a point of reading part of the Rule of Benedict every morning. Split into sections it may be read three times over the course of a year. This morning’s extract struck home.

“If we wish to dwell in God’s tent, we will never arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds. But let us ask with the prophet: “Who will dwell in your tent, O God; who will find rest upon your holy mountain?”(Psalm 15:1)”

Benedict reminds us that justice, honest and compassion are the hallmarks of those who walk with God. But he also reminds us that we cannot walk with God unless God first walks with us. We cannot do good without God’s grace.

If we sense the needs of the poor that is because God has opened our eyes. If we are aware of those who are oppressed it is because God has perhaps allowed us to suffer in some smaller way. If we campaign for cleaner air and oceans it is because God has first enabled us to share in the work of creation. As Christian Aid week approaches maybe this year we will have a greater understanding of those whose lives are not in their control.

In Benedict’s time holy people often thought that their journey with God was a personal matter. The most frequent expression of religious life was personal and individual. The Desert monastics lived as solitaries, eating little, praying much. This was a very privatised religion.

Benedict introduces us to a different journey. For him those who dwell in God’s tent are those who travel with God within the complexities and messiness of community living. Within a Benedictine community everyone bore a responsibility for everyone else. Practical things mattered. The Rule makes a point of caring for things, this might seem strange in a spiritual writing, but it has to do with living alongside others. If you broke a tool then putting it back broken simply meant that the next person who needed it suffered. Everything we do has a consequence for someone else. So for Benedict to walk with God means walking well with others. And we cannot walk well with others unless we first walk with God.

Hence Jesus tells us that he is the way, the truth and the life. He is the way towards God, if we know him then we know the Father.

On a walk recently we passed our church porch, I noticed someone writing in the book of prayer requests. Over the weekend three pages filled with requests for prayer. Our church is closed but people need contact with prayer. Candles appeared in our Easter Garden. We moved the Prayer Tree into the porch and never a day goes by without another leaf being added. This wasn't our idea, it is not a church initiative. It happened because someone first came to ask for prayer. The first step doesn't have to be our own.

If it is true that we can only know the way when God first allows us to glimpse something of the truth, maybe how life is for others, then we may learn much from what we are going through at the moment. The first step is God's, it is for us to choose whether to follow.