

Sermon for the fifth Sunday of Easter.

“FAREWELL!”

To family and friends, when we want to signify that we are moving away, taking a new job, going on a risky journey-even expecting to depart this world- we want to say “Farewell” or “Goodbye”. When someone is dying we hope that there is always the opportunity to say our goodbyes. If this is denied (for whatever reason) there may be long-term sadness about their death. There are many people(not just now in the time of the coronavirus)who, thinking back to VE Day, feel only sadness at this time of “celebration” 75 years later. So it is that the Funeral Service is very significant in the way it says “Goodbye”. Many have recently felt very sad too. Even the humour associated with the life of the deceased has not been remembered. That sense of gratitude has not been said.

I remember officiating at the funeral service of a member of the local Dancing Club. I discovered that, as people of a certain age, they danced and sang as they had done during the war. They asked if they could sing “We’ll meet again. Don’t know where, don’t know when “ as their friend departed the church. Theological? I thought so and commented. This was a valuable contribution to what I was trying to say about the reading-which was the Gospel for today.

“Well, Vicar, we did think we might ask for another song entirely- Wish me luck, as you wave me goodbye. But we thought that might just not be appropriate”

All those sentiments evoke something to be found in Jesus’ Farewell Discourse which is a sort of long goodbye. Part we read this morning. This part is very familiar because it’s often used in funeral services. It has words of comfort and hope for a future somewhere with God and with one another. It’s also about living life as we have not known it.

On this occasion,at the Last Supper, it is Jesus who announces that he is the one who is leaving his disciples. Unsurprisingly, he has the confidence to speak of his own future, his return to his Father, and to respond to questions and comments made for by Peter (who else?) in the previous chapter:

Where are you going?

Whither goest thou?

And then by Thomas, Philip, and Judas (not Iscariot)

Over the next three chapters, we hear

“Because of his deep love for his friends-and those who follow- Jesus makes the whole of their future safe and secure. He will have prepared the Way to eternal life, to a spiritual home, not made of stone,to which he will take them-and us!!!!

This spiritual home is described in a variety of ways, some familiar to us and some not, according to which Bible translation you use.

“ In my Father’s house there are many mansions

or many dwelling places

or many rooms

I think I much prefer the Revised Bible’s “many resting places” and written about more fully by Michael Ramsay in his commentary on St. John’s Gospel. I prefer this description because of the inference to the sense of journey or pilgrimage in this life as well as from this life to the next. Our guide and companion goes ahead to find and prepare comfortable lodgings and then returns (every time) to take us to them in true Eastern style.

When Maggie and I returned (as holidaymakers) to Santiago de Compostela long after our pilgrimage, we met an elderly Irish couple over a beer at the end of their journey who declared (smiling through their tears)

“There was never a moment when we thought we were unaccompanied.” We understood. There is time enough in these resting places (of which there are probably many) to rest, to hear, to listen, to heed, to think, to pray and reflect and even to serve in this accumulation of brief encounters . And to be drawn by God’s grace to accept, to confess, to forgive , to repent and then to thank and praise and worship (not necessarily in that order) as we discover that we are loved. We live now through God’s mercy in that hope of peace-redeemed at the last with all the rest who are incorporated in His divine love.

As the renowned poet-priest of our age , Malcolm Guite, writes

“Not as the world gives, not the victor’s peace,
Not to be fought for, hard won or achieved,
Just grace and mercy, gratefully received”

As one of my dearly loved and loving churchwardens said to me after her final communion on her death-bed

“You know, Chris, I’ve always believed, but now I know!!!!”

And so, I am reminded of the pilgrim mass said on our arrival in the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, sung by a lone nun who commanded the attention of several hundred pilgrims of all nationalities:

“Ubi caritas et amor. Deus ibi est”

“WHERE THERE IS CHARITY AND LOVE, GOD IS THERE”

May you know it too.

Chris Fletcher