

Journey of Faith

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

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

Our Christian life is often described as a journey. We are a people on the move, from one place to another, and from one state of being to another. It is, in some ways, a journey into the unknown. That's what defines our faith: the sense that we know the destination, but not necessarily the way there. Because we are unsure of the way, we rely upon a guide, but not just any kind of guide. We need a shepherd, who knows the way and will protect us and lead us to new pasture. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. That was true for the early disciples and it remains true for us now.

But to make this journey requires faith. Without faith, you may get part of the way, but not all of the way. What do I mean by faith? Take the example of the apostle Thomas, whom we know questioned Jesus which, rather than being an example of his lack of faith, showed him to be a true person of faith. Faith doesn't mean not asking questions. Thomas had a genuine need to know, and underlying that need was a love for his Lord which compelled Thomas to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, even when he knew of the dangers of doing so. It was Thomas's courage, rather than his doubt, which informed his faith.

Let me give you another example. When I was young my family often travelled abroad, and one place we visited, I knew nothing about - that was Fiji. There was no internet then, so I couldn't Google it. I suppose I could have gone to the library and taken out a book on Fiji, but I didn't. I went to Fiji, without trepidation, because I had faith in my father who bought the tickets and planned the journey, and we were all together as a family. Of course, I didn't call it "faith" back then, but that is exactly what it was. When we arrived in Fiji, I didn't know what to expect, which heightened my response to everything I saw. We spent a week there, which I still remember vividly, before returning home.

The difference between that kind of faith and the Christian faith is that, unlike a holiday, the journey of Christian faith lasts longer than a week, or at least, I hope it will. On the Christian journey you don't return to the place where you started from. Home isn't where you were before. Home is where you are now, and where you are going. In faith you continue to move forward, and as Christians you do that by following and trusting in Jesus. Now when people say that their faith journey has stalled, or that they don't feel they are going anywhere, it means that they no longer trust the one who leads them. Well, it may be as a consequence of a bad experience at church - maybe someone said something out of turn to you; maybe even the priest put you off. Maybe you had a life crisis and felt that God wasn't there for you. Or maybe you got distracted by other things, and lost interest, and started to drift away. Whatever the reason, you must find a way to get out of the rut you are in and back on track.

Our gospel reading today begins and ends with a journey. The first journey is undertaken by some Greeks - people who aren't Jews, in other words - who have come to the festival of the Passover. In those days it was common for Greeks to attend Jewish festivals. The God of Israel then, as now, attracts those outside of the Jewish faith, and Greeks could, within limits,

follow and observe Judaism. The visitors in our gospel reading politely ask Philip, one of the disciples, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Today I want to focus on that statement, because I think it is a beautiful and simple expression of the human soul seeking something or someone outside of itself, in order to be made complete. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Now Philip could have replied, “you aren’t Jews, be on your way”, but he didn’t, because he understood that Jesus has come not only for Jews but for all people, regardless of their background, religion or color.

Imagine if every Sunday strangers came to St Martha’s and said to the ushers, “We wish to see Jesus.” What would their reply be? “He is here.” He is here in the Scripture, he is here in the Sacrament, and he is present in our worship, in our stories, and in our lives. And when we take time to listen to one another, and to hear how Jesus has touched the life of a brother or sister in Christ, we can think that maybe Christ has the power to touch my life, if only I go out to meet him.

“He is here.” What we don’t say is, “you can’t come in because you are different, because you are not like us.” At that point we would no longer be the church of God, we would be a club, or an exclusive society. Unfortunately, the Church in times past has made this mistake, but we are more enlightened now, I hope. We no longer set conditions, like some early Christians did, for example by saying that Greek converts needed to be circumcised. We don’t do that here. We realize that the Church needs to welcome all people, since the greater the diversity of believers, the stronger the Church. It’s the same principle from which this country draws its strength, in the way it offers hope and freedom to many nationalities under one constitution.

“We wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. This is how they finally get to meet Jesus - it seems the point of the journey is now fulfilled, although for them, whether they realize it or not, their journey is, in fact, only just beginning. But wait one minute. When they meet Jesus, what does he tell them? “Those who love their life lose it; and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Not much of a campaign slogan, is it? Jesus didn’t do politics. What does he mean, that you have to hate your life? He means that you have to hate a life where you please yourself - where your main care and concern is yourself. Because that kind of life will make you unhappy and unfulfilled. This is where the Christian message challenges many of the messages we receive as we grow up. If life is only about satisfying yourself, then you will always fail, because the secret of life is to love and serve others.

I mentioned earlier that our gospel reading begins and ends with a journey. The second journey is the one Jesus makes when he is “lifted up from the earth, and will draw all people to himself.” That is the journey we too will make, God willing. In the meantime, I want you to ask yourself now, where you are on your journey? If following Christ means to change your life, ask yourself what has changed, and what will continue to need change? If your answer is, “nothing has changed, I am still the same”, you are probably no longer on the journey, unless you started life as a saint and never had to change.

As Holy Week approaches, this is a good time for a little introspection, and I mean a little and not too much. This isn’t about you, but about God. It means looking up to heaven and saying,

“I wish to see Jesus. I wish to follow him. I no longer belong only to myself, but I belong to God. I want to be on the journey that leads to God.” Your being here today, in church, is part of the journey - an essential part, in fact, because in church we learn about God, we receive God in word and sacrament, and we find that we are mysteriously bound and connected to one another through the grace of God.

Next week - Holy Week - there will be an opportunity to enter more deeply into the story of your salvation. This is the part of the journey where the closer you get, the further you go. As the passion story unfolds, let yourself be drawn into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why not commit yourself next week to follow Jesus every step of the way, from his entrance into Jerusalem, to the supper in the upper room, to the crucifixion and beyond to the day of unbounded joy, which is Easter. Be enfolded in the passion and mystery of God's story - our story. If you wish to see Jesus, I can think of no better place than right here, during Holy Week. See Jesus and let yourself be drawn into the saving mystery of his Passion.

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

Father David Beresford