

Easter 5A 10th May, 2020

As I sit and write this message I am thinking of all of you. I sit and imagine your faces and wonder how you are. Some I have seen in person or have spoken on the phone. Others I have emailed and wondered how you are. All of you are in my thoughts and prayers this day as most days.

As I imagine you, I think of the homes where you are. I can see some of you at the kitchen table. Many of you, I have been inside your house. Others I have been to the outside or dropped off mail or stood outside as you have waved from a window. And I see the many rooms in which we are in. I know the frustration of being restricted in what we are able to do and the social isolation some of us can feel- not just now but when everything is 'normal'. We are connected but for many of us we can feel disconnected, and alone.

The reading from the gospel of John this week tells a little of how Jesus was reassuring his disciples about the future. He had been speaking about his death and they were worried and confused. Jesus was telling them that he was leaving and none of them wanted him to leave. So he spoke of his Father's house. 'in my Father's house are many rooms and I am going to prepare a place for you'. Such comforting words that we will be welcome in Jesus' Father's house. Does that mean that being with the Father is actually 'home'?



Then in the reading from Acts we have the cruel stoning of Stephen. He had been reminding the Jews who were speaking to him of their history of faith. And then he told them of his vision- of seeing Jesus at the right hand of the Father. This vision was one step too far. The penalty for blasphemy in those days was to be stoned and so the people who Stephen had been speaking to took off their coats, lay them at the feet of Saul and then stoned Stephen to death. He had not done anything wrong and some of the words he used remind us of Jesus' crucifixion- when he asked for forgiveness for the ones who were killing him and when he asked for God to receive his spirit. We can only imagine what it must have been like- but it sounds like a cruel death to me. In the midst of the stoning Stephen turned to God- as though he knew that there was a place for him with God.

What we don't pick up in the reading today is the legacy Stephen left. He is considered the church's first martyr. In this picture of an icon of Stephen you can see three stones and a palm leaf. The stones remind us of his death and the palm leaf is a reminder of the eternal life through faith. It is sometimes known as the martyrs' palm.

As a Deacon in the early church Stephen was one of the 7 and their job was to ensure that the goods that people had went to all of the people in need, not just the favourites. Perhaps the book in the picture is his record of how money and goods were distributed.

The world in which we live is changing. There is a lot of uncertainty around us but the story of Stephen reminds us that there is more to this life and even when what may seem to be the worst thing possible happens, God is still with us. God is waiting for us and one day all of us will find our own room in the Father's house.

The other message to remember are the words that we can often hear. Jesus says 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me' (John 14, verse 6). The way of Jesus has three competing elements. One is about serving and that serving is about love. One understanding of the **way** to God is through **love** (agape love). This is living out God's love for us in how we love others. The other way is the **truth**. For some the truth will be a narrow focus and scriptures will be used to justify this. For others the truth is something that is still being revealed and is more open and inclusive than exclusive. And for others the truth is something that is only starting to be revealed as we come together. Like a globe of the world in the middle of a

room of people, each person will see a different part of the globe, it is only when we share what we can see that we come closer to seeing the whole globe. The third element is the **life**. Life is about growing, changing, developing, stretching and moving. Life is about crying and laughing, eating and sleeping, learning and teaching. Life is something much fuller than our imaginations.

The passage from John can be used to open up the way to God for all people, or it can be used to make the way very narrow for an exclusive group of people.

For us at Westmead, hopefully we are people who seek to walk in the way of Jesus, loving and serving whoever comes to the door, helping those who didn't fit (outcasts), eating with anyone and praying for everyone that we can. There will be times when we feel a little like Stephen and there will be a cost to our love and offering hospitality, yet both Jesus and Stephen remind us that we are not yet home. Our true home is yet to come- in OUR Father's house there are many rooms.

May you discover something more of how you know God, how you live your life and how you can truly know the way to God. May Jesus come even closer and God's Spirit walk beside you as we continue in the strangest of times.