

Easter 5A, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16, Peter2: 2-10, John 14:1-14

## Easter Faith: Defensive or Engaging?

### Introduction

In my experience, the one great recurring feature of the human condition is that we claim too much for ourselves: we claim too much for ourselves as individuals and as groups: in a sense we are all potential narcissists. In my experience, working across cultures, languages and creeds, we human beings have a capacity to turn wonderful ideas, majestic insights, into weapons. The most sublime of perceptions we are prone to abuse, hurting others and isolating ourselves. In fact, the more beautiful the idea, the more resplendent the concept, the more likely its misuse. What I am saying then, echoing the insight of Gabriel Daly, from our quotes of modern Christians, is that what matters is not just *what* we think, but *how* we think it: how we interpret our Faith Ideas, experiment with new Faith Ideas, and ultimately how we put these Faith Ideas into practice in the real world.

I want to first ground our thinking in the Gospel for the day (John 14:1-14) and then apply those insights to today, to our current context, our current experience.

### The Gospel

The Gospel reading is one of the most beautiful in what is arguably, the most beautiful Gospel of the New Testament– the Gospel of John. In it, we hear the so-called “Farewell Discourse”. In it we discover the value of relationship grounded in trust, as the followers of Jesus, learn to hold to the faith in adverse circumstances, leading to the question of Thomas – the earlier “Doubter” – how are we to know the way? And then Jesus’ response, perhaps the most sublime response in John’s Gospel and perhaps the whole New Testament “I am the way, the truth and the life”. The sheer beauty of this is overwhelming: aesthetically, poetically, conceptually. In it, Jesus does not just point us to the kingdom of God, as in the other gospels: rather Jesus *is* the kingdom of God. But taking it a little further: there is a sense of intense relationship here between the disciples and Jesus: one of intimacy, of loving trust. The implication is, walk with me, and all will be well, all will be well, all will be well, to quote the English mystic, Julian of Norwich.

And yet...and yet, what sort of community do you think would develop this sublime, imaginative theology? You might expect, a sublime community, a profoundly spiritual community creatively living out its union with Christ through, its union with each other. But...you would be wrong. John’s community, the source of the most beautiful of Christian theologies, is a “basket case”. What the biblical historians tell us, is that John’s community ultimately self-destructed, torn by factionalism, quarrels, discord and animosity. The most sublime, awe-inspiring, exalted theology became the very tool for dissension and disagreement. It was as if, the ‘better the theology’, the more license people felt to dominate others, to assert their faith superiority, their power. But not only did the community of John self-destruct, it also fell out with those outside it: the Jewish communities in the synagogues, objectified as “children of the devil”, and those who chose not to be converted – accusing them of “belonging to the world”, of “worldliness”.

What can we say then? Surely, what this community thought, the content of its faith understanding, the substance of its theology was breath-taking. But *how* they thought it, *how* they interpreted it, *how* they used it, as license for conflict and ultimately their own isolation and destruction, is a lesson in faith itself.

### Today

Easter Faith then, I think, is about the beauty of Christ. John’s theology captured that so well, as does much contemporary Christian thought. But...theology is more than just thought, about *what* we think, about content. Theology, Christian theology in particular, is about *how* we think, *how* we interpret God and Christ in a changing world, *how* we put God and Christ into action, building models for love and justice, for love and mutuality between real people

Today, we live in difficult times: we are experiencing the breakdown of our institutions: political, economic, and social. Instead of maintaining and building consensus – the life thread of democracies – we are increasingly at each other’s throats. Our ideas are fraying at the edges and are unable to sustain us

together. At heart however, the issue is a very concrete, organic one: a breakdown in our *connectedness* as human beings, a breakdown in our communities.

Now the Christian Church is part and parcel of this broader problem. The Church, as many institutions, is weaker than it used to be. Secularism is more militant and more self-assured. In this situation, the tendency of many Christians today, is to do what John's community did: *fall back* on the 'beauty' of what we believe, and shout it more loudly and more defensively, as we feel increasingly cornered. From a human point of view, that is understandable, but it is not enough, nor is it even helpful. In fact, it is ultimately destructive. To simply repeat the Faith in times of stressed change is to become little more than an island – disconnected from the broader reality. The sublimeness of the content of our theology is no substitute for interpreting the Faith, so it may *genuinely engage* with, be of practical service to a changing, vulnerable world.

Gabriel Daly is right. It is not just about *what* we think, the repetition of our beautifully sublime doctrine, the content of faith, but *how* we think it; how we put Easter Faith into practice in the real world, thinking in new ways, and experimenting in what we do: our practice. Easter Faith: defensive or engaging? Let's be engaging!