

5th Sunday of Easter – John 14:1-14 and Acts 7:55-end

In the midst of aggression, war, and the appropriation of religion for power that we've seen across the Pond in recent months, Pope Leo, with whom the Archbishop of Canterbury met this week, has spoken with challenging clarity.

He's reminded the world that Jesus cannot be used to justify violence, that God is not a tool of political ideology, and that faith, at its heart, is about peace, truth, and life.

The Pope has criticised the reported practice of immigration authorities in America denying holy communion to those in detention. Over Easter weekend, when the American President declared his intention to wipe out an entire civilisation unless he got his way, the Pope said these words were *'unacceptable'*. *'God does not'*, he said *'hear the prayers of those who wage war'*. He went on *'woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic and political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness and filth'*.

What's interesting is not just what Pope Leo said, but how. Not with shrillness or fear or hard-edged certainty that shuts conversation down, but with a moral clarity that is deeply rooted in Christ. More recently he said that *'the unity or division of the Church should not revolve'* around debates on human sexuality and that issues like justice, equality and freedom should take precedence over sexual ethics. A progressive voice with a generous vision. How refreshing.

And that brings us to our gospel. *'Do not let your hearts be troubled,'* Jesus says to the disciples the night before he dies. Already, he is speaking into a world not unlike ours - anxious, uncertain, competing voices claiming authority. And then he goes on: *'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.'*

It's a profoundly generous image. A comforting verse often used at funerals. There's an obvious parallel with Jesus' words a couple of chapters earlier – *'When I am lifted up, I will draw **all** people to myself'*. It resists the narrowness that so often creeps into faith. It reminds us that God is not small or tribal or confined to our categories. There is room. There is space. There is welcome. There is a future held open for us all. God does not need defending via our squabbles and schemes.

And yet - this same passage moves into something that seems sharper. Words that so often appear on the banners outside the megachurch... *'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

Is there a tension here? On the one hand, many dwelling places - on the other, a single way. On the one hand, openness - on the other, a claim that might sound exclusive.

In a context like ours - of relative economic comfort, where many of us enjoy the benefits of education and home security - it's very easy to resolve that tension by softening Jesus. To turn him into simply a wise teacher. A good man. Someone whose words inspire but do not demand. But the tradition of the Church has always said this middle ground won't hold.

The Easter season puts it starkly. We proclaim Christ is risen! Either Jesus is who he says he is or he is not. Either he is Lord, and we give him our whole lives or we do not. His claims are so outrageous they cannot just be admired from afar.

Jesus' words compel a choice.

And that's exactly what we see in today's Gospel. Thomas asks a very reasonable question: *'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'* Jesus doesn't respond with a map, or a set of principles, or even a philosophy. He responds with himself.

'I am the way.' Not, *'I will show you the way.'* Not, *'I will teach you the truth.'* But *'I am.'* John's gospel gives us these *'I am'* statements throughout – I am the true vine, I am the bread of life, I am the door for the sheep, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life and I am the way, the truth and the life. That is not the language of a wise guru. It's the language of someone who places himself at the very centre of reality.

The recent public interventions by Pope Leo show us that taking Jesus seriously – taking these claims seriously – cannot lead to arrogance or aggression. They lead to humility. They lead to peace. They lead to solidarity with the oppressed. *'Let holy charity mine outward vesture be'* – we will sing in our offertory hymn. They lead to a refusal to try and manipulate God for our own ends. In our first reading from Acts, for Stephen, they lead to his suffering and death when, even then, he, like Christ on the Cross, prays for his persecutors.

The use of Jesus' name to bolster power, to justify conflict, to draw hard lines between *'us'* and *'them'* is a scandal and masks a version of so-called Christianity that is shallow, often theatrical, full of certainty but lacking any depth.

Because if Jesus is the way, then the way looks like him: self-giving, compassionate, merciful with a bias for the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. If Jesus is the truth, then truth is not a weapon, but a person to be encountered. If Jesus is the life, then life is something to be shared, not controlled.

How will we respond to these words of Jesus? Do we reduce them - reshape them until they fit neatly into our lives, our assumptions, our culture? Do we quietly place Jesus alongside other good and wise voices, one among many? Or do we allow them to challenge us and how we live our lives? Because to say *'Jesus is Lord'* and that *'Christ is risen'* is not just to make a statement about him. It is a reordering of everything else. It means Jesus becomes the reference point - the measure of our decisions, our values, our priorities and that is always costly. It may mean letting go of control. It may mean rethinking what success looks like. It may mean standing apart from the easy narratives of our culture. But it is also, paradoxically, the place of freedom. *'Do not let your hearts be troubled,'* Jesus begins. That is where this all leads. Not to anxiety, not to fear, but to trust in Him who is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.