

John 14. 1-14; Acts 7.55 – end.

18th May 2014 - 5th Sunday of Easter –
St. Andrew's, Totteridge - 8 & 10:00 a.m.

‘Hearts and Minds’

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

I want to speak today about ‘hearts and minds’. You often hear politicians or military men wanting to win ‘the battle for hearts and minds’. The two become conflated as though they’re the same thing – I don’t think they are, I think there are important differences and I think our gospel reading today offers us an opportunity to think about what these differences are.

For those of us who are blessed to be parents, we have each had to come to terms with the fact that our children are not our own – that they are a gift from God. We don’t possess them any more than we were able to possess our spouses – good and true relationships between husbands and wives, or children and parents, can never be established by rule of will, in overt displays of power, through the use of force or dominance.

Jesus, who is fully entwined in a special relationship with the God of love, has tried to reassure the disciples in the reading we just heard, just after he told Peter that he will deny him three times. He probably saw the pain on all their faces as he spoke of this denial, as they each struggled with the idea of anyone giving up on the one they loved and followed, let alone Peter. And because Jesus loved and cared for them so much he had to say,

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me’. This is our whole reading in a nutshell. Your hearts will not be troubled if you truly believe in God and the one whom God sent;

here lies a peace beyond description. He doesn’t say ‘do not let your hearts and minds be troubled’ – just your hearts. Does this mean that there’s something about our minds that we should be wary of? Is there something more fundamentally true and pertinent about our hearts than can be said about our minds?

I think there is. If you try to assert the mastery of your mind, you’ll almost certainly encounter trouble because we are, as human beings, often made up of contradictory thoughts and ideas held in tension. We may want to save the earth – we may also love Formula One racing. We can all react irrationally and sometimes disproportionately. Does this mean we are either entirely lovable or hateful? I don’t think so.

For instance, in the horrific story of the death of Stephen from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear of a young man called Saul who witnesses the stoning (such a terrible way to die) and who is later swept up in zeal for the enthusiastic persecution of early Christians. Saul will, through the power of Jesus’ Spirit, perform a complete u-turn to become Paul, the bringer of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Just as with Saul, so with Peter, and the other disciples failed Jesus in many different ways too. Their minds were engaged, but their hearts were not. And if we’re trying to find ways to be the inherently good, kind, conscientious person we all would like to be, then our failure will cause us pain, just as it did Peter.

Like any good parent or shepherd, Jesus cares for his flock. He wants to spare the disciples pain. And he knows that he can do this if he can persuade them to believe, to have faith, but not if he forces them. True shepherds do not force their charges to follow them or chase after them with dogs; they *lead* them to safety and to new green pastures by building a relationship of *true* love and

real trust. An essential part of the development of that love and trust is a loving forgiveness for when we get things wrong. The shepherd will not lay into a lost sheep with a big stick; he will pull her gently out of the thorns, clean her wounds, apply ointments, and show that he cares.

And then he will say that the one he loves will always have a place to stay with the Father, because God's is a capacious house, with rooms for everyone, no matter how foolish they might have been. 'How do we find this place to stay', Thomas asks; and Jesus replies that you must go through him, '[the way and the truth and the life](#)', the loving shepherd at the entrance to the sheepfold, to get to the house of the Father.

Some people have trouble with this saying; that it must mean that only Christians can come to God – I don't accept this. I believe in universal salvation, I believe we all come to God eventually come what may, precisely because our God is a loving God; that we shall all be forgiven one day, our wounds tended, our pains eased, our brokenness mended. Jesus is the incarnation of God on Earth and as such he is constantly trying, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to guide us on our way, to avoid the thorns, to show how much we are loved and cared for.

What all this means is that we can be with God right here and now, but only if we give up on the mastery of the power of our selfish minds, and try to make room for all the 'others' in our loving hearts, even the difficult ones - maybe God's particularly trying to speak to us through the difficult ones. Our personal salvation will always lie in loving God and in loving the 'other' in all their joy and pain and shame. Here is the way of truth and life; here is the way of Christ. Here is the fundamentally pastoral mission of a truly caring church. *Amen.*

John 14. 1-14 **Jesus the Way to the Father**

14

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Acts 7.55 – end.

⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

1 Peter 2.2-10

²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner', ⁸and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

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Sunday School Talk: 1 Peter 2.2-10

Did you know you were each royal Kings & Queens of God's holy Church? All you grown-ups too! Well, according to this first letter of Peter's you are! He says you are members of a royal priest-hood, a holy nation, God's own people.

How many of you have read the Narnia books? Do you remember how the children in that story all became Kings & Queens? Peter's letter says that you can be just like King Peter, Queen Susan, King Edmund and Queen Lucy in that story - you just have to have faith in Jesus as they had faith in Aslan the Lion.

You can also think of it in the same way that Peter's letter suggests. Jesus was like the chief cornerstone, specially chosen by God and especially precious to him – his own Son. But the people of Jesus' day rejected him (*toss away the lego brick*) – they turned against him and demanded that he be killed. You know, in a way, we reject him all over again when we don't believe in him either, or don't do what he asked us to do.

But the first Christians said 'no – this man Jesus is too precious to be treated like that' (*pick up the lego brick*). Jesus' followers had had the benefit of seeing him quite a few times after his death on the cross, and they came to believe that he wasn't dead at all, that God had raised him from the dead and brought him back to life – just like we can be brought back to life even when we're sad and miserable, or if we've done something wrong.

If we're just the kind of stone that people trip over, that's not connected to anything other than its own selfish desires, then we'll fall down too. We just end up sad, frustrated and bitter. All we have to do is turn to Jesus and have faith in the fact that God must love us very much to have sent his only Son.

Who knows what a foundation is? If we think of Jesus as 'the living stone' – the chief cornerstone, by whom we can all become part of God's living house, the church, then we can begin to see how, in joining ourselves to his sure foundation, we can build a community of love that changes the world. (*Ask people that, if they believe in Jesus, to bring up their own bricks of faith and start to build a structure.*)

You see it doesn't take long for even quite a basic shape to form that, because we're all joined in faith, is inherently quite strong. It wouldn't take long for this to become a palace fit for a king!

This is how a church works – working for God, we all build it up together, and that's why you are members of the royal priesthood that Peter was talking about. So please stand everyone, and as they leave, please bow to each other and to the Kings & Queens of Sunday School!