

REFLECTION FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Based on John 14: 1-14 (with reference to Acts 7: 55-60) - Revd Paul Timmis

On Friday we paused to remember the cessation of hostilities in Europe 75 years ago. Some will have held socially distanced street parties; others won't. But with television and radio programmes scheduling being dominated by VE Day commemorations, for an all too brief moment in time, we were dragged out of our own Covid-19 related bubble and called to pay tribute and say thank you to the WWII generation - people who had *their lives put on hold* for almost six years of war and who'd continue to live with restrictions for some years to come afterwards.

We can't think of VE Day and not call to mind the countless acts of self-sacrifice and heroism that led to Victory in Europe or fail to reflect upon the many freedoms that we'd have been denied had that generation not been successful: freedoms that we can now appreciate more than ever.

Amidst the playing and singing of songs from the era and the re-runs of speeches of the day, were personal stories: stories expressing relief and joy that war was over, stories that spoke of the 'bittersweet' nature of the day for those who'd lost loved ones.

For many, VE Day marked the end (or near end) of long periods of enforced separation. I can't get through such days without shedding a tear for my maternal grandparents who both survived the war and whom I was fortunate enough to enjoy many years with but who I most associate with that era because they'd only just met when war broke out and my grandpa was soon called up. Even with all that's going on at the moment, I can't begin to understand what they went through in the years that followed. And the same could be said for thousands of other couples and families up and down the land and across the world. But the joy that the prospect of being reunited with loved ones would bring, well, perhaps we're beginning to get a taste of what that might feel like.

When he shares his last meal with his friends before his death, being separated *from* and reunited *with* them is very much on Jesus' mind. By this point he knows that he's about to be betrayed and realistic enough to understand what will then happen to him. He knows that he's going to have to journey on alone. So, as they eat together, he asks his friends to love one another and then implores them, 'Whatever happens, don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in me, as you believe in God.' In other words, perhaps, 'Trust me.' And then, he talks about dwelling with the Father and of himself being 'the way'.

There's plenty that could be said about what Jesus meant when he uttered the words, 'In my father's house, there are many dwelling places, rooms, mansions'. There are countless interpretations for each of these translations but he's talking about a relationship not a particular location, so I tend to shy away from any reading that sees Jesus as describing some luxurious heavenly accommodation.

Similarly, we could talk for hours about what Jesus intended his friends to make of his, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' line. I'm pretty sure that he didn't intend it to become the exclusive proof text that it has for many. But that's an argument for another day.

At the heart of what Jesus is saying here is an emphasis on an ongoing relationship – between him and the Father, between him and his friends and, through him, between his friends and the Father. This is about connection, journey and connection on the journey. And, bearing in mind all that’s likely to take place in the difficult days to come for him and his friends, what Jesus is saying is, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Abide in me. With my Father there are many ways of connecting. Even when we’re apart we’ll still be connected. I’ll still be with you.’

At the time the disciples are confused by Jesus’ words, of course. They can’t quite grasp what he’s driving at. But later they’ll revisit these and other things that Jesus said and did, and then they’ll begin to understand their significance and meanings a little more. That these words were subsequently recorded and have been passed on to us is evidence enough that this was so. Despite the difficult days surrounding Jesus’ arrest and death and even given all the fear and confusion that engulfed them at the time, looking back, they’d know that what Jesus had said to them had been true. They *had* still been connected. He *had* somehow still been with them. And this would continue to be the case for them, and for others, even after Jesus’ ascension – as the *Book of Acts* shows us. This didn’t mean that they’d avoid any hardship or difficulty, pain or death – as the brutal killing of Stephen demonstrates – but it did mean that they’d never be alone, they’d still feel connected to Jesus, to God.

None of this should be much of a surprise to us. We know that it’s possible to still feel closely connected to someone even if we’re apart. As we’ve remembered in recent days, the WWII generation knew this to be true even though at times, they only had love letters and hope to hold on to. And we know ourselves that even when we’re apart from people whom we love – as we are at the moment – we can still feel closely connected to them, whether we have mobile phones, social media and video conferencing software or not.

The really good news is that Jesus’ promise – that his friends will always be connected to him, to God – extends to all those who’d follow his way. And that includes us. So, hear what this Jesus says to us today and every day:

When you are anxious or worried, I am with you.

When you are fearful or frightened, I am with you.

When you are overwhelmed by feelings of isolation, fatigue or boredom
or by the pressures of home schooling or work, I am with you.

When you are unable to sleep in the middle of the night, I am with you.

When life hurts and/or seems cruel, I am with you.

When you are confronted by death, I am with you.

When you are so full of grief that it feels as if your heart is about to break, I am with you.

Though you can’t see me, and it seems so very improbable, I am with you.

I am always with you.

I will always be with you.

I will always hold and love you.

With God, with me, there are no separations and reunions
we are always connected

you are always held and loved.

May such knowledge set us free to be people of the way, people of truth and people of life. That we might become the people, the Church, that God would have us be. Amen.