

## Stewardship Sunday 2017

### John 14.1-14

A phrase has been got stuck in my brain and has been swirling around in the space between my ears in this past week. That's partly because it keeps cropping up in what I read or hear. And, no, that phrase is not 'strong and stable leadership' but perhaps it's stuck in her because it has the same shape and rhythm. The phrase is 'glad and generous hearts'. It was there in the reading from the book of Acts last week, when Luke is describing the extraordinary community life of the first Christians, how they held all things in common; how they sold all their possessions and distributed to those in need, how they prayed daily in the Temple, broke bread together and 'ate their food with glad and generous hearts'. Their breaking bread, their eucharist, was still in the context of a meal and it was a celebration – 'glad and generous hearts'. We still call the Eucharist a celebration, presided over by a celebrant, but the meal has gone (it went quiet quickly, actually, within a generation), but sometimes don't you also feel that the celebratory ethos is not always to the fore. It seems to be that we are called to break bread with glad and generous heart because we've got a good deal to celebrate, not least the one who brings us together, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us and the world, freely, gladly, generously and pours out his Spirit on us.

If that's not always our experience of worship, our experience of coming together, perhaps that's because we haven't been blessed with the same experience of Jesus and of God as those first Christians; after all they had him in the flesh, didn't they? It was all right for them but we don't see him; someone was only saying to me a week or two ago – not just saying, more like crying out in frustration, even anger, 'why doesn't God make himself known to me?'; then it would be so much easier to believe. I understand that question; it was certainly one I used to ask a lot when I was a teenager and into my twenties. And I was thinking of that encounter as I was reading today's gospel and it struck me that it wasn't just the question of the person who came to see me; it wasn't just my question; it was also the question that the disciples were asking, Philip on behalf of everyone else:

'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'

Just show us, just open the curtain just for a moment – that's all we need: something to assure us that it's all real and true and... there.

And you know what the answer is?

'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.'

Now, to understand that better we need to rewind the text a bit to the statement of Jesus that provoked Philip's question:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.

Now that statement brings forth a whole lot of other questions from us, doesn't it? I've been quizzed about this text perhaps more than any together in the bible. A bit exclusive and intolerant, isn't it? Salvation for Christians, those who profess the name of Jesus, but everyone else can go hang? What about sincere followers of other faiths? What about those who have never heard of the name of Jesus? Are they excluded? My answer is that there are two ways of reading this text and you can argue

reasonably for both of them in the context of the gospels as a whole. You could read this in the narrower, more exclusive way: unless you explicitly believe in Jesus you cannot know God. But there is another way of reading this – and it's a bit like one of those drawings of a cube on paper that you can see one way but you shut your eyes and try to forget that and open them again and you see another way. No longer going into the page but coming out of it. Maybe what it's saying is that anyone who comes to the Father, anyone who knows God, comes this way, my way, the way that I have revealed, whether they know it or not. In other words, it is possible that Jesus is saying that it is possible to know him without realising it, and that knowing him you know the Father. Let's test that theory. Is there anywhere else in his teaching where Jesus gives the possibility that people can know Jesus, as it were, anonymously, without realising that it is Jesus? The answer to that is yes. Remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? It is the end of time, it is judgement day and the Son of Man separates the sheep at his right hand from the goats at his left. To those at his right hand he says:

Matthew 25.33f:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

And what did those who are called ‘the righteous’ say:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king replies

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me.”

In other words it is possible to serve him, welcome him, and love him without realising it.

And that is not to deny the particularity of the Incarnation – that God has made himself known to us personally, in the flesh, once, in one life, death and resurrection, at one moment in history, in one place on the planet – only here, only then. He is made known in one who came not to be served but to serve, to lay down his life for others, to show us the way, the way of emptying yourself, the way of finding yourself and finding God, not by focussing on your own needs and ambitions but by finding the truth finding life, finding true humanity and true divinity in the face of the hungry, on the lips of the thirsty, in meeting need, giving dignity, being instruments of healing in a broken world. That's what Jesus did and when they asked him to show us the Father he was indignant – what on earth do you think I have been doing these years of being with you if not showing you what God is like, where God is and helping you to find him.

Stephen when he was about to be stoned saw a vision of God – ‘he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.’ Perhaps that's what Philip wanted ‘Lord, show us the Father’, perhaps it's what my visitor wanted, I think it's what I once wanted – and I still wouldn't say

no! But what we need is already there. We don't need to see anything else; we just need to see what is before us with new eyes.

And when we do we will rejoice and that gladness leads us into generosity. Ah, yes, it's Stewardship Sunday and I should have been talking to you about giving and your financial contribution to St Andrew's. Well, I've run out of time so haven't done it. Or perhaps I have. For perhaps it was the disciples' vision of the generosity of God revealed in Jesus that they were responding to when they began their revolutionary movement, sharing all things in common, distributing to those in need and breaking bread together with glad and generous hearts. You never know, perhaps it might just catch on.