

Devotional Blog

Sunday 10th May

Separations are hard at the best of times. When we first leave our family and live apart it can hurt. When loved ones die, we are dismayed, disorientated and often despairing. The Covid 19 pandemic has bombarded us with stories of separation. Every one of those chilling daily statistics of deaths is another tragic event. Every day that an elderly care home resident goes without a family visit is a day of sadness. Separation even stalks funerals, with people observing social distance when they ache to console, while others watch their loved one's funeral service they are not allowed to attend on mobile phone video clips.

When Revd. Paul Wood was asked to write a reflection for the Methodist Recorder to be used when folk could not attend a funeral because of the Lockdown, it was no great surprise that the Bible passage he turned to was John 14:1-14. We all have heard these words at funerals. Why? Because they are the words of Jesus as he is explaining to the bewildered disciples that he is going to leave them. In short, he is going to die, and the bottom will fall out of their world. Chapters 14 to 17 in John's Gospel are known as the Farewell Discourse. They are as instructive today as they were the moment Jesus spoke them. They tell us about life after death, the divine nature of Jesus and God's love. Yet, the opening words of Chapter 14 seem odd: "Let not your hearts be troubled". What? Of course, they're troubled, the disciples have just been told their Leader, the person they have invested all their hopes in, is not only going to leave them but is to be brutally killed. Perhaps the words seem wrong today, for the pandemic has underlined that many hearts

have been troubled by the fact that the gift of mortal life does not last. Jesus is not telling the disciples or us not to be sad. Jesus' heart was troubled when he saw Mary weeping at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:33), when he realises his hour has come (John 12:27) and earlier that evening when he declares that one of his own will betray him (John 13:21). Jesus means to bring comfort to his disciples then and now; not sentimental comfort, but a more powerful commodity: courage. He does not rebuke the disciples for being saddened by the prospect of his death or for us for grieving over the death of loved ones. Rather, Jesus tells the disciples and us that, even when evil and death surround us and have their way, we do not need to lose heart. He has a plan for us, a place for us, a room for us. The way to that place is Jesus himself. This is not "pie in the sky", this is now! True life is with him, and even when our mortal time is up, it is still with him.

When Martin Luther was asked what it means to have a God, he answered that God is what you hang your heart upon. Jesus is saying "Hang your heart on God, hang your heart on me". Some Bible translations talk not about hearts but the singular heart: "Let not your heart be troubled". This opens up the idea that Jesus is speaking to the disciples as a collective, as a single group of followers. This idea is just as valid for us, as Jesus' call to have courage is certainly individual, it is also for us a body of believers, as one church. During the current lockdown, the amount of Christian messaging and support has been heart-warming. The slogan "Faith not fear" has been acted out in the physical and virtual world. In a time of great separation many have responded to Jesus' call for courage. The bottom line is that nothing can separate us from Christ. Paul writing to the new church in Rome puts it like this: " I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor

anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

God promises to love us and make room for us, to know us and be known by us; and this never ends. So, our hearts need never be troubled.

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