

As many of you know we have Morning Prayer each week day, and on a Sunday. Morning Prayer is an Office - that means it has a formal liturgy with set prayers and canticles – as well as space for silence and more focused prayer about the needs of this place. As part of these prayers we have a bible reading – at the moment in the morning we have been reading Ephesians, and each day we also read slowly and meditatively a psalm, or sometimes a few psalms. They are set out, and so people say the same psalms all over the world if they use the lectionary. Now the point of this story is that on Friday morning, as part of morning prayer we were reading Psalm 33 – it is a very lovely psalm about the greatness and goodness of God – but when we got to verse 17, I got the giggles – the verse began *'The war horse is a vain hope for victory'* – now laughter is not necessarily an appropriate response! My brain had missed the word 'war' and so I had an image of a horse and people sitting around a table, waiting for all their troubles to disappear! I think with all the election talk over the last few weeks, the recesses of my brain started to connect the dots in unfortunate ways.

Now aside from the peculiarity of my brain, or sense of humour – the verse from the psalm raises an interesting question – in what do we hope? How do we seek victory, and what victory do we seek?

At present, if you are politically active these questions might relate directly to our immediate national election. But for others this could relate to others things – victories within relationship, or at work or school – or over an illness. Victory is one of those strange words that we use in a variety of contexts. You may have come to church this morning, with the hope that God may help you with several victories, but I wonder, like the psalmist, which of our intents are vain hopes for victory?

Today we have heard three readings which also pick up this theme of vain hopes, and hopes for victories that may be realised. We hear the story of the martyrdom of Stephen; then we heard Peter explain that Christ is the cornerstone, and then we just heard the stunning Gospel reading from John – which is generally read at funerals – as it the story of the ultimate hope and victory and the promise of God throughout all eternity.

So what is vain hope? And what is hope that we can really trust or aspire too? How do we live with the disappointment when our hopes or our victories are not realised? Well at one level we have all had to do this in some form or another – there will have been a job that we didn't get, or a lover we were unable to woo, or an exam or test that didn't go as we would have liked, or even friends who did not behave in the way that we might expect.

Generally we pick ourselves up and move forward – but this doesn't always happen – and for some vain hope – and the resulting disappointment, entraps them and they feel like they will be never hope again. (and they may not)

This can so often feel like the case when someone very close dies, or leaves us – we feel that the sun will never shine again, or that hope will never again touch us. This is the very situation Jesus is addressing in the account we hear in John's Gospel today. The

Disciples have been with Jesus for nearly three years. They haven't just been friends, they have lived every day together, travelled together, been threatened with death. They have given up all that they have had and transformed their lives. They have totally given themselves over to the task of supporting, following and teaching. It is not a small commitment. Maybe you can imagine giving up all you have for a cause or a campaign, walking away from all that is familiar, and you might have a glimpse of the experience of the disciples. Then after all that they have been through, Jesus sits with his disciples at the last supper, a story we re-enacted on Maundy Thursday, and prepares them for his death. He has outlined all that is to happen, and as you might imagine, they are upset – and so Jesus offers them these words of comfort – '*Do not let your heart's be troubled – believe in God, believe also in me*'.

When the disciples feel most vulnerable, most exposed – when it feels like their journey with the Messiah has been a vain hope – Jesus calls them back to this fundamental relationship<sup>1</sup> of trust and assures them that he is not abandoning them. Rather, he is returning to his Father, and Jesus assures his disciples that this is also their destination. I love Thomas' banter with Jesus at this point – 'but how will we find you' at one level he has taken Jesus quite literally; but this is not the point of Jesus comfort – it is not about directions or formula – it is simply about a relationship – a relationship with Jesus and with God. "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (14:6).

At one level this is very simple – an instruction for living – and yet it can be very difficult to live out. We should not be alarmed by this, because even the disciples found this, and they had lived with Jesus intimately for 3 years and still they struggled with this message. It is why we hear the longer story from John 14 today. Jesus says to the disciples, look you have been with me all this time and still you don't seem to get it! Philip and the others are overwhelmed – Jesus is suggesting that they will do greater things than Jesus himself has done – and they are sceptical; and I suspect we are often sceptical too – partly because we don't see things the way Jesus sees them – we expect it all to be spectacular, as the first experience of Jesus was – but I don't think this is what he meant.

For Jesus it is all about relationship, and like we hear in the witness of Stephen and then of Peter, this relationship shows the presence of God. It takes imagination and faith to see – not cartoon style imagination – or even the imagination of fantasy – but the imagination to look beyond the literal and see the mystery and wonder of God.

Jesus promises to be with us through the power of the Spirit, to work in and through us to accomplish his purposes in the world. This does not necessarily happen in easily visible, spectacular ways. Yet wherever there is healing, reconciling, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God. Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus' presence in our midst<sup>2</sup>. Post enlightenment generations like ours struggle with this, because we like evidence and proof – we want to assign credibility to what is happening

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3238](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3238)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3238](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3238)

– but Jesus is pointing out that the source of all life, the source of all hope – the source of promise – God – is at the heart of everything. And this is even more spectacular when we are open to see it and acknowledge the wonder and majesty of God.

This season of Easter which last for a long 50 days – 10 more than Lent – is a time when we are encouraged to notice the power of the resurrection; to be reminded of the God who calls us all to life in abundance – to help us focus on how we live out each day the hope and promise of the resurrection. That whatever we face, God is with us. This is not just words and platitudes –it is supposed to be about the core of our being – the relationship which gives purpose to life!

Eastertide is also a time when we too can acknowledge that we have questions - that like the disciples we don't always get it – that even after years of following Jesus around we wonder how we get to where Jesus is, or why the world is still so broken . And in the questions that we might ask, we can be encouraged too by the answer which Jesus gives his first disciples. Please don't be troubled – I am in your midst.

It is the reason that each Sunday we come to this altar together. We break bread together because whatever our questions, whatever our uncertainties – Jesus is made present with us. We break bread together to remind ourselves, and each other, that we are not alone – that we are part of a community bought together in Christ. We break bread together, because regardless of any vain hopes we might have had, we are reminded that whatever tomorrow brings – or even the rest of today – God is with us. This was the promise of Jesus to his disciples at the last supper, and it is a promise that is made to us each time we come to this altar together.

Whatever victories we are seeking at this time; however hard or confusing we find the world, however much pain we are feeling – Jesus says to us – take comfort – believe in me. And if we think that this is a lonely place to be, remember that even Stephen as he faced his death saw Jesus standing with him which gave him the courage to face the pain before him.

The vision of God is the greatest hope that we can have – Stephen and Peter sang out in praise of God when things were at their most difficult, and maybe that's what we need to do to! The core of our being is our relationship with God, it is our identity – but most importantly it is our strength. *Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God! Says Jesus.* It is a promise that has stood the test of time. Amen.