

TRoubLED HEARTS

Acts 7. 55-60

1 Peter 2. 2-10

John 14. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder, what troubles your heart today?

For me the list is long and it's not pretty. I think about all the litanies and prayers we have offered at Stephen's over the past few years for the violence and suffering in the world. I think of the plight of immigrants and refugees. I think about increasing tensions around the globe. I think of the effects of coronavirus on national and world economies. I think about those grieving and mourning the death of a loved one, and of other friends who are facing serious health issues. I think about families that are struggling, marriages that are under pressure, workers who are unemployed and people who are hanging on by a thread. And perhaps selfishly, I think about my own sorrows, losses and disappointments.

Despite what our Lord says in today's gospel about not letting our hearts be troubled, my heart is troubled; and I suspect yours might be too. What would you add to my list? What is troubling your heart today? None of us can get through life without a troubled heart. I don't think that any of us can look at the pain of the world today, the suffering of a loved one, or our own wounds and hurts and not have a troubled heart.

Our current context, the one in which we hear Jesus's words to us, is not that different from the context in which Christ first said those words. Those words were spoken on the night of the Last Supper. Our Lord has just announced his departure

from this world, that is, his forthcoming death. Feet have been washed. Judas has left the table and stepped into the night of betrayal. Peter will soon break his silence with a threefold denial. Thomas is lost and asks, 'How can we know the way?' And Philip, on the other hand, has lost his centre and can't see what is right in front of him. 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,' he says.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' Jesus says. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled?' Is Christ really serious about that? Does he know what is happening in our lives and our world? What is our Lord telling us? It's not as if there is an on-off switch for troubled hearts. How do we begin to make sense of today's gospel in a world whose heart is constantly troubled?

It is not hard to understand why this text is so often used in at funeral services. Death troubles our hearts, and we want to find some balance, stability and harmony; and this text provides that for us. This text, however, is not just about the afterlife. It speaks to the very circumstances that trouble our hearts today.

Think about those times when your heart has been troubled. What did it feel like? We all experience it in our own ways, but often our troubled hearts make us feel isolated, paralysed, overwhelmed, powerless, out of control, disconnected, fearful and perhaps lead us to despair, tears and anger.

For those who have troubled hearts, the unspoken question is this: 'Will the centre hold, or is everything collapsing around me?' Thomas and Philip were feeling the collapse. Much of the world is, and perhaps we are too. 'Will the centre hold?' That's our question.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled.' Jesus recognises that our hearts are troubled. He is not warning us about a future condition. He knows that the troubling has

already begun. He can see it in us, because he's already experienced it within himself,¹ and he will experience troubling in his heart yet again before he goes to the Cross.²

What if 'not letting our hearts be troubled' begins with looking into our hearts and seeing and naming what troubles? That means facing ourselves, our lives and our world. That may be the first and most difficult thing Christ asks of us in today's gospel. If we are honest with ourselves, we are forced to admit that sometimes we do not want to see or name. It is too difficult and too painful. 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Thomas speaks for us all. We've lost our centre. How do we re-centre? Where do we go when it seems that everything is collapsing around us?

Here's the paradox. Sometimes we have to lose our centre in order to find it. I am not suggesting that God purposely de-centres us. De-centring happens: it is a part of life and it is a part of the human condition. Sometimes it comes out of circumstances that we did not create or choose; other times, it is a consequence of our own choices and actions. Regardless, our Lord says that it is not a place where we should stay, nor is it a way to live. It is not the life that Jesus lives or offers us.

If your heart is troubled, then it's time to re-centre. Re-centring does not mean that our hearts won't be troubled. It doesn't necessarily fix the problem, whatever it might be. It means, however, that our lives are tethered to something greater than ourselves. It means that our hearts are held secure by the Divine Life; and we are not free-falling into the abyss. Christ is reminding us that *there is a centre*, and that centre is not *us*. We do not have to be the centre, nor do we need to establish it. In fact, we can't. Instead, we awaken to it. We already know the way to, and the place of this centre, our Lord says.

¹ Christ was troubled at seeing Mary and the Jews weeping at the death of Lazarus (Jn 11. 33); he was troubled when he thought of his approaching death (Jn 12. 27); and he was troubled in spirit when he foretold his betrayal by Judas (Jn 13. 21).

² Cf. Lk 22. 39-44.

‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,’ Philip says to Jesus. Poor Philip! He’s bought into the lie that the Father is apart from, outside of and distant from himself. The centre, however, is *within*. The Father’s house is *within*. The kingdom is *within*. Wherever we go, there is the centre. Whatever we face, there is the centre. Whoever we are, there is the centre. Regardless of what troubles, there is the centre; not because we are the centre, but because God is *within*.

In the language of today’s gospel, the centre is the Father’s house and there are many dwelling-places in this house. In the Father’s house, there is a dwelling-place for every troubled heart. I am not talking about the afterlife, and I am not thinking of this as some sort of ‘celestial dormitory’ for those who have enough right belief and right behaviour. I am talking about the dwelling-places as the places and ways in which God’s *life* intersects with our own: mercy and forgiveness, love, generosity, compassion, healing, hope and joy (just to name a few). These are the dwelling-places for troubled hearts; these are the places of re-centring. Every time we accept and receive these gifts of God to us (and they are actually signs of who he is) we regain our centre; our balance is restored; and we take up residence in the Father’s house.

What in you today needs re-centring? ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.’ What if, in the midst of troubles, our hearts could maintain a normal rhythm and beat with God’s life?

‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.’ I hear those words, and I imagine a sign blinking like a heartbeat; and on that sign it says:

‘Rooms available. Rooms available. Rooms available.’

Amen.