

Year A, Easter 5

Stones, big stones, little stones, stumbling stones, violent stones, stones that protect, stones that build, stones that destroy, even royal stones. Even at the best of times you can't get away from them, but for Christians in particular stones have a huge resonance this weekend.

King Charles sat on the Stone of Scone, or the Stone of Destiny, at his coronation yesterday. Some call it Jacob's Stone, claiming that Jacob used it as pillow when he had a vision of angels descending from and ascending into heaven up and down a ladder. Sadly, that seems to be myth as geologists say it was hewn from a sandstone quarry near Scone, and in any event the type of stone where Jacob had his vision is limestone not sandstone.

Nevertheless, as an integral part of the Coronation Chair the Stone of Scone has been used at coronations for about 1300 years, first in Scotland until England's King Edward 1 stole it in 1296 and took it to Westminster Abbey, where it has been used ever since for the coronations of first English and then British monarchs.

Turning to today's readings, they are all about stones too. In our first reading, Stephen is stoned to death by the High Priests, the elders and the scribes, in other words religious leaders after proclaiming his vision of the heavens opening up and seeing the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Would that we would have Stephen's grace and generosity of spirit to echo Jesus' words on the Cross if we were to come under such attack ourselves, even metaphorically.

By contrast, in Psalm 31 the Psalmist, who is under attack from his enemies. portrays God as his rock of refuge, his fortress, the place he runs to for protection.

And in the Epistle, Peter describes Jesus variously as a living stone, the cornerstone, chosen and precious and finally – at least for non-believers – as a stone that makes them stumble, a rock that makes them fall. But as believers and members of the royal priesthood, Peter says, we too are called to be living stones that can be built into a spiritual house.

You might well ask, where are the stones in our Gospel reading because there is no mention of rock or stone anywhere in the passage, but we need to look at it

in context. The previous chapter is full of stumbling stones as far as the disciples were concerned. Jesus had told them that he was going to die, that he would be betrayed and that Peter would disown him. And worse still, they would not be able to follow him where he was going. A veritable obstacle course of stones and rocks.

No wonder the disciples were in turmoil and fearful. Their world was being turned upside down, their hopes and dreams dashed. The ground was shifting under their feet. Change was heading their way like an express train and there was nothing they could do about it.

Little wonder that Thomas said, well could you least show us on Google Maps where you are going, or that Philip says they could cope if Jesus at least showed them the Father before he abandoned them. So typical of us isn't it? When we feel lost or anxious, and God truly knows how much there is to be anxious about right now, we want the GPS directions, the five-point plan, the Ten Commandments. Do A, B and C and we'll get safely to our destination.

And all Jesus says is Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. I am the way, the truth and the life. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. So no masterplan, no roadmap for the disciples – or indeed for us. What it comes down to, Jesus says, is quite simply our willingness to trust Jesus.

If I had been at the Last Supper and listened to what Jesus had just said, my reaction to Do not let your hearts be troubled would probably have been along the lines of You must be joking. Yet his words were similar to the Don't be afraid sayings that litter the Old Testament and which were said to Mary, the shepherds and to the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning.

Jesus wasn't giving a command to his disciples, he was just reassuring them that they didn't need to be troubled by what he had told them because both he and God knew what they were doing. And when he said believe in God, believe also in me, he wasn't asking them to assent to a particular set of doctrinal beliefs, it was much more a case of him saying, look, just trust me.

I am the way, the truth and the life. Well yes, but what does that really mean? How do we put our trust in that? And even more importantly what does 'No one comes to the Father except through me' mean? No one comes to the Father except through me, I would suggest, is also a massive boulder that has done

Christianity a huge amount of harm by the way it has been interpreted by many Christians.

What do people of other faiths, particularly Abrahamic faiths, hear when Christians quote that verse? I suspect that what they hear is that our God is an exclusionary God, a God who doesn't love everyone, a God who only loves Christians. I don't believe that to be true, because I believe God is love.

And I think that it takes no account of the fact that the human Jesus was a Jew who never had any intention of starting a new religion, rather his purpose was to reveal God's deep desire to be in close relationship with humanity. As Jesus himself said in Matthew 15 verse 24 he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

Or look at it in another light. There are approximately two billion Christians in the world, each one unique yet each one also made in God's image. Spiritual diversity is built into the human DNA, so to claim there is only one way to God is at best contradictory.

In the times we live in, living by trust or faith is really hard. The disciples had a way of relating to Jesus and he was telling them they needed to trust him as their relationship changed. It was hard for them then and it is hard for us today.

If we're honest with ourselves we want a God who fixes things the way we want them fixed, a God who brings an end to war, to poverty, to abuse, to violence, to depression, to viruses that kill indiscriminately, a God who makes faith easy by providing answers that we like, a God who will do B if I do A, a God who will forgive me if I work hard.

But these are the gods we create for ourselves. We have to let go of these false gods, these imposter gods.

Instead, we need to pray to know the God who is mystery, the God who says, I have to go now but I will still be with you, you are not alone even as things change. And the good thing is, Jesus tells us, that if we have seen Jesus we have seen God

But the truth is, here and now in 2023 with the benefit of the Bible and literally millions of witnesses who have gone before us, that we do know the way. It will

take time and not be easy but whenever we trip over a stumbling stone God will find us if we allow him to, because that is what God does.

So, to come back to my question a few moments ago, what does 'I am the way, the truth and the life' mean? At its simplest it is to live a Jesus-like life, loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbour as ourselves, emptying ourselves on their behalf. Or to put it another way, live out Micah 6:8, i.e. acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God.

And that takes multiple forms, indeed there are hundreds of millions of people who live the Jesus way, who have either never heard of Jesus or if they have do not proclaim him as their Lord and Saviour, because for instance they are Jews or Muslims. Are those sorts of people going to be excluded from the Kingdom? I don't think so, I think God is bigger than that, more generous than that, more loving than that. There are many rooms in God's house for a reason.

As one commentator put it: ...Jesus is the Way. He leads us to the Father and all who worship the Father come by the Way, *whether they know it/him or not* (my italics). An Anabaptist minister we heard put it slightly differently – there are 50 ways to Jesus, but there is only one way to God.

I want to end by making reference to almost the very beginning of our Gospel reading. As he did after the resurrection, Jesus says he is going ahead of us, as he invariably does, this time to prepare a place for us.

Think about that for a moment. We have a place with God. We have a place with God not because we deserve a place or because we have earned a place, but just because Jesus has prepared it for us. Is there any better news than that? Any bigger promise?

Do not let your hearts be troubled.