

Which way

1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14, Psalm 31:1-5,15-16

Rev J Shannon

You could be forgiven if on first impression today's texts are all about stones but its not. It's about what we hold onto and what can be built. So I won't be throwing any rocks today but I will contrast how the message in Peter and what seems to be taken as the main message in John have been interpreted to be almost the opposite of each other. I do not believe this is so. Peter is preaching the same ideals as Jesus.

The opening words of John and the Psalm are the comforting words I hear most often in times of crisis and sorrow – especially funerals. “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” and “be my rock of refuge and a fortress to save me” are beautiful and soothing. They are words we should hold close to our hearts when needed. The deep concern Jesus recognises in his disciples is a glowing illustration of the love and tenderness He shared.

The Psalm is a beautiful prayer that invites us to reflect on the ways we have experienced rescue, shelter, guidance and steadfast love. It is a personal prayer and we very quickly share the poet's longingness and love. I recommend that you read it again tomorrow morning, in fact, every morning.

The theme that really jumps out once you get past the rocks is “house”. Peter talks about a spiritual house and Jesus tells us about His father's house. Whose house? And which came first?¹

Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to his father's *house* and he will prepare a place for them. He promises to come back and gather them up and take them to a permanent home. The picturesque language is pretty clear. It speaks of a location or a structure – my father's house; many dwelling places; a special place... and reinforces the concrete images (or should I say stone?) with comings and goings from that place. Apparently, and I'm no expert, the clue is in the Greek translation of the noun which means “dwelling places”. A house/dwelling means something much more like, “abiding”, as dwelling within. If we abide WITH Christ, we are dwelling within – and Him in us. And as he prepares a place for us in God's house – we are also called to a dwelling within...abiding. That we may know the divine – intimately.

Here, I'd like to digress – as I am wont to do.

¹ Or if you remember the old joke, “who's on first?”. “Who's on First?” is a comedy routine made famous by American comedy duo Abbott and Costello. The premise of the sketch is that Abbott is identifying the players on a baseball team for Costello. However, the players' names can simultaneously serve as the basis for questions (e.g., “Who is the first baseman?”) and responses (e.g., “The first baseman's name is Who.”), leading to repeated misinterpretations and growing frustration between the performers.

I just finished reading Sue Monk Kidd's book "The Mermaid's Chair". It is a deeply spiritual book – as are most of her books both fiction and non-fiction. In this story, the main character asks a monk who is God to him? And he answers,

"I experience God like this beautiful Nothing,' he said. And it seems then as though the whole point of life is to just rest in it, to contemplate and love it and eventually disappear into it... and then, other times. It's just the opposite. God feels like a presence that engorges everything. I come out here, and it seems the divine is running rampant. That the marsh, the whole of creation, is some dance God is doing, and we're meant to step into it, that's all. Do you know what I mean?"²

So I'd just like to stop there for a moment – and ask you, how do you experience God. Or more to the point, how do you abide in God? And God in you?

The ability to feel love is essential to our well-being. It is so important that a Sydney University professor has spent more than a decade looking a molecule small enough to enter the brain and activate oxytocin receptors.³ Oxytocin is called the love drug and it is the neurotransmitter that lights up when you fall in love or giving birth. It underpins feelings of trust, recognition and romance. What this means is that they have found a way to stimulate the part of the brain that allows you to feel love and this, they believe is a key to treating aggression and social withdrawal in people with a range of psychiatric disorders.

As for myself, it was in my encounter with God, with the understanding of the deep and consistent love that allowed me to finally open my heart to another.

Now, I'm going to get to the tricky part. John's theology is very clear and sometimes quite different from the other Gospels. John's text is most preferred by those who don't like ambiguity and specifically, those who like a translation that spells it all out. But even John leaves some gaping holes that can be mis-interpreted or interpreted for specific purposes.

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me..."⁴ is so familiar to us, we hardly even think about it. But this is the passage that has led me to more than one barney with some ministers. You see, in many people's theology, this is read as I am

² Sue Monk Kidd, *The Mermaid's Chair*, (2004), Penguin

³ "A Sydney chemist hunted this molecule for a decade. Now it's worth \$273 million", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2023, national edition, Science section, Professor Michael Kassiu

⁴ John 14:6

“THE ONLY Way and THE ONLY TRUTH and THE ONLY LIFE. NO ONE comes to the father but by me. People have capitalised certain words in their minds and in their theology and turned this into a dogma that excludes most people on the planet”⁵. In fact, my dearest colleague assumes all the other faiths of this world are going to hell. I don’t.

Rev Sue says there is no support for this position in the text. First of all, Greek does not have capital letters – it is ALL capitals.

It is probably more accurate to read the text as I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except THROUGH me...have you been with me so long and not got that I live in God and God lives in me, therefore if you have seen me, you have seen the father. Live in relationship with me, live as I have lived, and you are in God as God is in you. Live, have faith, dwell in that knowledge. Note the word DWELL. It is an invitation. Follow me and I will show you God.

“Long before followers of Christ were known as Christians they were known as people of the Way. Christianity has always been more about journey, relationship, an orientation in life, than a set of beliefs. Codified beliefs, such as our creed, are important and have their place in our communal life, but they should not be confused with faith itself. Faith is always about relationship, about travelling with and in Christ, about dwelling in God.”⁶

And so we turn to Peter. Peter also talks about houses and not surprisingly, he is also talking about a union rather than a dwelling. But first, a little context. If the most recent research is right, this letter was written to a group of people who were displaced and dispossessed, not only spiritually or religiously but also socially, economically and politically. He is telling them that in Christ, God makes a new place for people who have none. The language of ‘household’ gives shape and boundaries, it provides a place, purpose and community for those who, “have tasted that the Lord is good”.

There is an underlying theme that there is a unity of believers in a single household. “Understanding that Jesus is a living stone and that believers should

⁵ Rev Sue Grace, Companions on the Way , contact@companionsontheway.com, Denmark, Western Australia © 2019 – accessed 2 May 2023

⁶ Ibid

also see themselves as living stones, whom God builds into a single spiritual house.”⁷

The “spiritual house” is not a social club that simply meets the needs of its members. It is a household in which the head is God and Jesus is the cornerstone. It is equal in that as much as believers belong to one another in the household, they also belong to God. God builds the house. God lays the cornerstone. The house is known by its cornerstone, Jesus. It is accepted or rejected by its cornerstone.

As a result of their identification with one another, the believers in this new house have a new standing. They are no longer outcasts or marginalised by their social condition. They have now formed a body, powerful and provocative.

Just as it is with the John passage, there are some who will say they have earned their place. That THEIR standing with God is because they are righteous or pious...and this has allowed them to exclude others from the household. The text gives us no such license. It is God’s house and God has the sole authority. In fact, the passage supports the conversation around “the priesthood of all believers”. That is, our joint responsibility for gathering, shepherding and sheltering. We have a responsibility to build a place for others.

So the question is which way? Is it my way or the highway? And the answer seems to lie in the word “dwelling”. The house is not ‘up’ there – or down the street. It’s not on the greener side of the hill. It is in us, in the divine and open for business. There is a place for all of us.

God, who made many paths for many people, I am grateful you sent Jesus to show me the way. I was lost but now I know where I am going. God grant all people of all faiths smooth paths, enlightened ways. Amen

⁷ Brueggemann, Cousar et al, Texts for Preaching, Year A p. 296