

Christ's Way is Our Way

a sermon preached on the

5th Sunday of Easter

20 April 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lections: Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

During these 50 days of Eastertime the icon in our peace sanctuary is one variant of the type known as 'Christ Pantocrator', Christ who rules over all. In this type Christ is sometimes imaged head and shoulders, or as with ours, seated – Christ the greater Moses who ascends a mountain and sits down to teach. ¹ Usually Christ holds in one hand an open book, whilst gesturing in blessing with the other. The texts are often from St John's gospel: 'I am the light of the world'; 'Do not judge according to appearances, but be just in your judgement'; or Matthew's 'Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden'; ² sometimes just a plain Alpha and Omega. He points to the written words of the Scriptures, words which interpret the meaning of the Christ as the One in the beginning with God, the One who is fulfilment and completion of all. ³ On the pages of the book in our variant of the icon Christ holds that tremendous text we hear in today's gospel: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." The text in the book is in Greek of course, though not modern Greek. ⁴ In these Eastertime days the icon points to the risen and ascended Christ who is our way, truth, and life.

But just what does it mean for Christ to be the way, the truth and life? I think this is a very difficult matter for the church. For we know only too well how this text is used against people, as a bludgeon or as a tribalistic totem. And we know only too well how those who proudly declare belief in this text can be the perpetrators of such appalling bigotry, narrowness and violence. And we know very painfully how this text, along with others, can be misused to create and shore up a religious barricade, a Christian ghetto of the self-assured, puritan and triumphalist. And we know with great sadness that because such religious attitudes and behaviours can cause such injury there are so many others who have reached the conclusion that allegiance to the kind of Christ envisaged by this religion is toxic to their minds, their souls and their bodies. Perhaps most tragic of all, decent and well-intentioned Christians, somewhat ashamed of all this, depreciate this text (along with certain others) out of a desire not to offend and to be 'pastoral'. And in a time during which different religious traditions are rubbing up against each other as never before we find this text particularly awkward. After all, how can we hold to this text and not in the same breath effectively condemn people of other faiths to eternal damnation?

This alerts us to two equally-tragic extremes – on the one hand the making of this text simply an *idea to believe in*; on the other an *abandonment of it out of embarrassment*. Our hearts are indeed troubled! But the risen Christ, knowing our anxiety, assures us that we need not be. ⁵ This is because belief in Christ who is the way, the truth and the life has nothing to do with defending a proposition, nor about being inoffensive to others, but about being marvellously relaxed in a dwelling which is given to us in the Father's house.

Now it is necessary at this point to take a brief excursion in order to deconstruct a pervasive interpretation of verse 2 which is reinforced by the English translation 'mansion', and this text's use at funerals. Indeed, this verse's use at funerals alerts us to the way in which it has been hijacked. Mourners, understandably upset about the death of someone they love, and frequently feeling deeply exposed religiously-speaking at such moments, turn to this text to shore up the hope that their loved one is being taken by God to a 'better place', a 'mansion' in the sky – the words of the King James Version having stuck like fly and fly-paper. ⁶ The problem with all this is how it envisages both humanity and faith in Christ. Belief in Christ the way the truth and the life involves believing some impossible propositions now in this life, in order to be transported safely to a special hidey-hole, a 'mansion', in another life, another time and space. When Christians collude in this kind

¹ Matthew 5:1

² John 8:12; 7:24; Matthew 11:28

³ John 1:2; Colossians 1:15,17

⁴ John 14:6 The Greek New Testament is published in lower case: **Εγω ειμι η οδος και η αληθεια και η ζωη**; however the icon tradition mostly presents the texts in abbreviated and (mostly) upper case: **ΕΓΩ ΕΙΜΙ Η ΟΔΟΣ(Σ) Κ(ΑΙ) Η ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ Κ(ΑΙ) Η ΖΩΗ**

⁵ John 14:1

⁶ John 14:2 KJV "In my Father's house there are many mansions."

of pious mumbo-jumbo it not only dishonours human life itself, but is also misguided pastoral care for it leaves people with mere super-naturalism. By this distortion of the text Christ the 'Way' is an extra-terrestrial, and his Way leads only to outer space.

In fact, St John's word in verse 2 is actually the same word he employs repeatedly in chapter 15 – in that chapter usually translated as 'abide'.⁷ This word's range of meaning includes: 'to stay in a place', 'to remain in a sphere', 'to stand against opposition', 'to hold out', 'to stand fast', 'to stay still', 'to endure'. Thus, in the Father's house there is a 'sphere of influence' in which there is an enduring, a standing fast, a standing against opposition, a being still, a remaining – in contrast to a running away to an imagined mansion! Jesus is 'the way' insofar as he makes tangible and possible for us this sphere of influence – not as a substitute for us, but as the pioneer and perfecter of our humanity.⁸ Participation in Christ's dying and rising is thus the means of enduring, of remaining, of participation in Christ, and in the Father. "You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."⁹ "Abide in me as I abide in you."¹⁰ "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."¹¹ "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."¹² In short, this abiding, this standing fast, this enduring, this sphere of influence is *union with God*.

Christ being the way the truth and the life, therefore, is the means by which there is forged and made possible a standing fast in this sphere of influence which is union with God, instead of running away. In his final prayers for and with them Christ will pray to the Father: "I in them and you in me, *that they may be completely one*."¹³ Here is the same all-too-shocking insight which got Stephen stoned to death by religious gate-keepers: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Humanity standing on the right hand of God";¹⁴ and Jesus' declaration to Nathaniel: "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Humanity";¹⁵ and Matthew's bold appropriation of Isaiah: "Emmanuel. God with us."¹⁶ All these symbols point towards the goal of the gospel - that sphere of influence which is indestructible union with God. And none of this should come as a surprise to John's readers. For from the very beginning of the gospel John has made explicit the union of God and human, heaven and earth, spirit and flesh: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."¹⁷

Thus, Christ being the way the truth and the life is of no earthly use to us except as bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, abiding in and with us. Otherwise all we have is an extra-terrestrial potentate to fear, a super-natural proposition to be believed, a law to be obeyed, an other-worldly mansion to flee away from this life to. And that cannot possibly be **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion*, 'good news'! To qualify as 'good news' Christ's way, truth and life *must have something to do with our own native humanity*, the same humanity in which Christ abides. Abiding, dwelling, being in union with God-in-Christ must, therefore, be our human vocation. Indeed, this way, this truth, and this life must be a reality which is actually coming into being in and through our humanity, through our own flesh – not in spite of our humanity, or only to be experienced as a delayed-gratification reward when we die.

Thus, we are not spectators of Christ's way, truth and life, but active participants in it. The Paschal Mystery, the beating heart of these great 50 days of feasting, is not something Jesus does instead of us, but involves our willing, conscious and hope-filled participation in Christ's enduring, Christ's abiding – not a mere proposition we believe in, but *a reality we undergo*. Christ's Way is *our* way. Christ's Truth is *our* truth. Christ's Life is *our* life. Now that is good news!

So, on this Annual Meeting of Parishioners day let us be reminded that it is not the great plans which we vote on today which are the centre of our life together. Our practical plans are important, and worth some effort, yes. So long as we remember that the heart, the core, the nuclear reactor, the very reason for our gathering at all is this great undertaking which is *coming to being within each of us*. We ourselves, in our own here-and-now bodily experience are becoming what we eat, the Body and Blood of Christ, abiding in the steadfast, enduring sphere of influence of the Father, an indestructible union with God, becoming co-creators, participants in the way, truth and life. Thanks be to God!

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁷ John 15:4 (3 times), 5, 6, 7 (2 times), 9, 10 (2 times)

⁸ Hebrews 12:2

⁹ John 14:20

¹⁰ John 15:4

¹¹ John 15:9

¹² John 6:56

¹³ John 17:23

¹⁴ Acts 8:56

¹⁵ John 1:51

¹⁶ Matthew 1:23

¹⁷ John 1:14