

10th May 2020

## ***Hearsall at Home***

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at Home.

We hope that you listen to this service either on a Sunday morning, or at another time, and you will worship, sing, pray and reflect on the scriptures along with all of us.

A written copy of the service is also available as a download on our website, so if you know anyone who would like that please let us know.

Also available is an extra resource: Bible study notes for those who would like to go deeper into the main texts of the service.

So sit down, relax and prepare yourself to worship God with us.

***Not a password***

Call to Worship (Micah 6:8 Easy Read Version)

Human, the Lord has told you what goodness is.

This is what he wants from you:

Be fair to other people.

Love kindness and loyalty,  
and humbly obey your God.

Hymn

Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christlight for you  
in the nighttime of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;  
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow,  
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;  
let me be as Christ to you;  
pray that I may have the grace to  
let you be my servant too.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come; your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.  
Now and forever. Amen.

#### Thanks for our fellowship

*Two people have asked me to include them in our prayers at this point.*

Loving Father, we thank you for all our friends who are worshipping with us this morning. We think of Iris Carr and Audrey Ree along with all who find it difficult to be alone. We remember one another now and take joy to think of the fellowship we share in spirit, even though we are in separate houses. Let's call to mind some of the dear faces of our friends. Loving Lord, thank you that in the sheer variety of all our faces, we see your own dear face. Hold us together in one loving spirit today and let us each in our separate homes give praise to your holy name. Amen.

#### Prayer of thanksgiving for Christian Aid

Loving Lord, we thank you for the work of Christian Aid.  
For every Christian Aid week held over the years, and for the generosity of the British public;  
For the leadership and vision of Christian Aid and for their mission to remember that love unites us all;  
For Christian Aid's partners around the world, translating generous donations into practical actions;  
For the opportunity to give to Christian Aid again this year;  
We bless you O God of justice.  
And now we commend the continuing work of Christian Aid into your hands.  
At this time of lockdown, when a traditional approach to Christian Aid week is out of the question, and when many experience a loss of income, we pray that those who can still afford to be generous will remember their work to relieve poverty, by making online gifts this week. We pray for wisdom to guide the charity through these difficult times, and we remember the poor around the world as they face the consequences of reduced funding from overseas.  
Amen.

#### Song

Peace,  
Peace will,  
Peace will come,  
And let it begin with me.  
We,  
We need,  
We need peace,  
And let it begin with me.  
Oh, my own life  
Is all I can hope to control.

Oh, let my life,  
Be lived for the good,  
Good of my soul.  
Let it bring peace,  
Sweet peace,  
Peace will come,  
And let it begin with me.

### Behind Closed Doors

This week our speaker is Orane Onyekpe who shares about life in Warwick University during lockdown.

Hello everybody

I can say I have gotten quite used to our new lifestyle. It is a bit slower than usual and a bit more still but otherwise it is not that different from my normal PhD life. I still work on my thesis and teach. The difference is now I teach online through zoom, a video conference platform, it works quite well. I also spend a bit more time with Uche as we now both work from home.

What has proven difficult though is to keep a pattern and separate work time from relaxing time. I used to go to the library to make sure I worked when I worked and relaxed when at home. I feel I don't work enough now without that special space. I also miss the community there. Thankfully, there are a lot of ways to keep in touch. I usually call a friend or a member of my family once a day. Paradoxically I have taken the time to call some people more regularly than I usually do.

Overall, I quite enjoy this time. It is slightly slower and quieter. I have taken the time to enjoy more artistic activities like painting and writing and reading for pleasure and I listen to Sunday service in the evening and the flexibility is quite nice. I've even been able to attend my dad's church once when he was preaching. We also go out to play football in the field, with Uche sometimes and I take walks by the nice pond we have by our flat. The spring is blooming from my windows and I've enjoyed seeing the trees in white blooms first and now is the new green of young leaves, and the birds singing in the trees. I feel blessed being and comfortable in these times that are really hard for so many.

Thanks Orane for that insight into your life right now.

### Offering

We come to our offering and as we do so, just to say that if you would like to give to the work of Christian Aid this year, you'll find a link to their website on our own home page. If anyone would like to donate cash and can get that to me, I'll be happy to forward your donation to Christian Aid.

So, God of the poor, we thank you that your mission is especially to bring comfort to the needy and the suffering. Thank you for the opportunity to continue supporting Christian Aid,

to support other charities and to support our own church fellowship. We offer these and all our gifts in gratitude to you, because you are the source of all that is good. Amen.

Song (WT 96)

For the joys and for the sorrows  
The best and worst of times  
For this moment, for tomorrow  
For all that lies behind  
Fears that crowd around me  
For the failure of my plans  
For the dreams of all I hope to be  
The truth of what I am

*For this I have Jesus*  
*For this I have Jesus*  
*For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus*  
(Repeat)

For the tears that flow in secret  
In the broken times  
For the moments of elation  
Or the troubled mind  
For all the disappointments  
Or the sting of old regrets  
All my prayers and longings  
That seem unanswered yet

For the weakness of my body  
The burdens of each day  
For the nights of doubt and worry  
When sleep has fled away  
Needing reassurance  
And the will to start again  
A steely-eyed endurance  
The strength to fight and win

Intercessions

*This week our intercessions are prepared and read by Denise Ree.*

Dear Lord as we gather in your presence, we bring to you our prayers and praises for those we love and for the wider world.

At this time of pandemic, we think of all those who have been affected by covid 19. Firstly, to those caring for those who have the virus that you will be by their side keeping them safe and giving them the strength and knowledge to care for those in their care. I especially bring Daniella before you; she is my daughter's sister in law, a nurse at Walsgrave on the COVID ward who has now found herself with the virus. We also pray for those suffering from this virus that they recover well. We also bring before you now those who have died and the families and friends they leave behind. Lord comfort those in need of your love and help them to cope in the trying days ahead of them. We also bring to you those with difficult

decisions to make we pray for the Government, business leaders, managers of companies large and small guide them through this difficult time and be with them in their hour of need, especially when they have to tell employees there is no longer any work for them.

Closer to home I offer up those on our church community for Kay and Ray as he recovers from his surgery; for Sarah, Tiina and Alan not being able to get out at all; and for those in our church family on their own or having to rely on others to do the things they so desperately want to for themselves again. I also lift before you Jenny who has not been well this week.

We give thanks for the safe arrival of babies born during this time of isolation from each other: for Sapphire Rose a new granddaughter for David; Cobi Dunn a new great grandson for Audrey ree.

We will now pause for a while to bring those known to us personally before God

Father god we know you love us all dearly and one day we will all rejoice together in your company but until that day be with us as we go about our daily lives and keep us safe till we can meet again as your church on this earth.

In the name of Jesus Christ our loving saviour I offer you these prayers.

Amen

### Readings

#### 1 Peter 2: 2 - 10

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”

7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

8 and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

#### John 14: 1 - 14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going.”

5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

9 Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. 11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. 12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

### Song

O spread Your wings of mercy over me  
And guard my heart with true humility  
No shadow of the darkness pressing in  
Only the holy overshadowing  
Underneath Your wings, overshadowing

No refuge will I seek but God alone  
No hiding place save only at Your throne  
Only the cross, the blood to wash my sin  
Only the holy overshadowing  
Underneath Your wings, overshadowing

*You are my shield, and my glory  
You are the lifter of my head  
And though the storms may rage around me  
I’ll be safe within  
Beneath the holy overshadowing*

No burden on my back too hard to bear  
Only the easy load You bid me wear  
Until these troubles pass, my heart will sing  
Praise for the holy overshadowing  
Underneath Your wings, overshadowing

Underneath Your wings

Overshadowing, overshadowing

May the words of my mouth, recorded on Tuesday, and the thoughts of our hearts, mainly on Sunday, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen

### Sermon

*Not a password*

*I am the Way and the Truth and the Life*, said Jesus, *no one comes to the Father except through me*. It's an open-and-shut case. The only way to be with God the Father is as a Christian - to go through Jesus.

But a moment's humane thought throws up numerous challenges to the justice of this claim. What about sincere adherents of other religions? What about exceptionally humane non-Christians such as Gandhi? What about people who lived before the time of Jesus? What about good atheists?

What about people without the mental capacity to understand what the words through Jesus might mean - those with multiple and profound learning disabilities? What of those who die as babies? What of those unable to speak? What about those with severe mental health problems, for whom religious talk is like red rag to a bull - destabilising, and leading to obsessive supernatural talk? Are all such people forever lost?

It's not a new problem, and is called the *scandal of particularity*. Only Christians are saved? Is this not literally an unbelievable doctrine?

The trouble is, we read these words of Jesus as members of a religion called Christianity, with all its doctrines, structures, traditions, culture and history. We can't help imagining that Jesus saw all the Baptist, Anglican and Catholic churches we know so well, and so was reassuring us all that we had backed the right religious horse. Buddha and Mohammed and Moses and Confucius and Marx and Darwin were all very well and had much to offer humanity, but there was only one true religion: Christianity, and unless you pronounce the name *Jesus* as your Saviour, you're lost.

But Jesus, when he spoke these words during the Last Supper, very likely had no intention of setting up a new religion. What if he meant something very much simpler, something purer?

Thomas and Philip act as foils in John's account; they stand for the ordinary person wrestling with Jesus' words. *The Way, Truth and Life* verse comes in answer to Thomas' question, *Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?* Jesus' reply suggests there's something integral about his own way of being that shows us how to go to the Father. Thomas asks for directions to heaven; Jesus says I am the directions in my very being.

And then later Philip seems to exasperate Jesus when he asks, *"Lord, show us the Father..."* What does he expect, some mystical ceremony in which the Father is revealed like some gleaming apparition? What does he think - there's some special ritual, some

password, some incantation, some ceremony, some magic, some secret, that will conjure up the awesome presence of Father God?

No, says Jesus - surely after all this time with me, you've got it! You must have! *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*. And if for some bizarre reason you haven't seen that, well look at the results... I bring forgiveness and hope and healing - because I trust in the Father. And if you guys trust in the Father too, then you'll be in him and he'll be in you, and all this forgiveness and hope and healing will carry on forever.

\* \* \*

Peter tells his readers - a selection of small church fellowships in what is now Turkey - to crave pure spiritual milk. He tells his listeners to cry like babies!

Why? The metaphor is simple. A baby is helpless to earn its food. All it can do is cry. All it can do is trust in the love of a mother.

There is no choice. There is no merit. There is no payment. Even ugly babies just have to cry and, outside of exceptionally evil circumstances, the baby is fed. All it has to do is crave the milk and cry, and the breast will come!

What can this represent, but the undeserved favour of God? And then, writes Peter, having tasted the goodness of God, you want more, and you grow up. But the foundation, the milk, the first food, the core nourishment is this: God is good and God loves you just as you are. Right now.

\* \* \*

So when Jesus says, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, how about understanding it this way: Jesus was not saying, you'd better sign up to the one true religion or be damned. He was saying, by God's very nature, and by our very nature, God's favour and mercy and love cannot be earned by anything we can do or say. God's positive regard cannot be merited. God's love cannot be attracted by exceptional moral behaviour.

God is good, and Jesus showed us a way of living whose foundation was a total trust in the unmerited favour of God. It's not that you'd better get your religious language right - be sure now to say the magic word 'Jesus' or you'll never get to heaven... He was saying look: God is good. We trust that goodness. We become one with God and so can never die.

Jesus was speaking in the shadow of the cross. And even then he says, *Do not let your hearts be troubled*. Immediately prior to this, the betrayer Judas had been unmasked, and Peter's destiny to deny Jesus had been revealed. And yet Jesus says *Do not let your hearts be troubled*.

It's as if he says, "I am about to be deserted by all of you and will be nailed on a cross in the heat of the day and left for dead, and I will be abandoned in my hour of dire need, yet I say *Do not let your hearts be troubled*..."

“Why? Because in going to the cross I reveal most vividly that God cannot be bought or cajoled or persuaded to love you. Even if you nail his Son on a cross, he will still love you.”

To attract the favour of God by religious rituals is like trying to flood a mighty river by pouring a cup of water into its copious flow. To try to move God to love you is like trying to move the earth from its orbit by jumping up and down. To try to buy the favour of God is like trying to buy out Google with a ten pound note.

When Jesus claims to be the only Way, this is what he means. Not, *sign up to my religion*, but *live in the goodness of God as a given, like a fundamental law of nature*. It's the only way we can live. It's the only way to love. And it's certainly the only way to die.

\* \* \*

And so Peter's letter makes much of the suffering of Jesus. Jesus was rejected by humans, he says in verse 5, yet he is the cornerstone from which the whole temple of believers is built. This cornerstone was rejected - yet in its very rejection it defines the lines - along and across and up and down - of the whole building of the church. Everything will align with the cross.

Jesus' experience of rejection was the proof of what we're saying today - God's favour cannot be merited. God's love remains, even though humanity despised and spat upon and condemned and executed God's own Son. That's the precious stone. That's the jewel of our spirituality. That's the foundation of faith! That's the cornerstone of the church. That's the milk of anyone wanting to live well - trusting that love simply **is** there aplenty for us all.

So to know Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life isn't like knowing a secret password that gets us into heaven. It's having a conscious and lived awareness of the staggering love of God. So I will always invite others to live as Christians - because as Christians they experience the open secret at the heart of the universe; that God is love. To live from that experience is so good, so very, very good, that of course we want to share it far and wide, saying, *Taste and see that the Lord is good*.

The week after next I'll be taking a couple of funerals. One is of a man who suffered serious mental health issues and so was unable to sustain attendance at church. Another is of an elderly lady who died from covid-19, having lived, by all accounts, a simple happy life of love. But she has not attended church for many years because she used to be part of a very narrow Christian sect which was controlling and stifling. She found a kind of salvation by leaving such a narrow church.

Put yourself in my shoes as I stand at two consecutive new graves a week on Tuesday. Would you cast doubt on the eternal destiny of these souls, just as their bodies have been laid in the ground, and as their families look on? Or would you be commending them to the perfect mercy, wisdom and love of God?

As I write on Tuesday, my phone tells me that 29,427 people have died of covid-19 in the UK. Some were Christians. Some were Hindus. Some were Muslims. Some were religious.

Some were not. Some were exceptional heroes. Most were ordinary. Some were villains. Most were regular sinners.

No doubt some had profound and multiple learning disabilities. Some struggled with mental health issues. Some were prisoners. Some were doctors risking their all for others. Some were dedicated nurses. Which of them did God love the most?

All must be committed to the perfect mercy, wisdom and love of God. Because that's the secret at the heart of the universe.

And if that's true in death, let it also be true in life. Covid-19 is no respecter of persons. But the love of God is more universal and enduring than any sickness or disease. And our call is to continue to build a world where all are offered security and love and goodness in their lives, not because they deserve it, but because, like newborn babes need milk, they need love, and we have the capacity to share it. Only from that foundation of love can we hope for goodness to thrive in our world.

In the new edition of the Messenger, so beautifully produced by Maria, you'll find a copy of my poem *The Thing*. It's an attempt to express some of what I'm getting at today.

### The thing

I want you to come and sit by me  
as the day is growing warm,  
to drop your jacket on the floor  
and breathe with me and breathe with me.

Your cross is very precious,  
but slip it gently from your neck;  
and leave it on the trinket tray  
and breathe with me and breathe with me.

And your face veil so wisely saves  
the best from common sight;  
but hang it on the cloakroom pegs  
and breathe with me and breathe with me.

And all the other clothes you wear:  
morality and certainty  
and politics, ethnicity,  
and hopes, desires and fears...

just lay them on the waiting chair -  
you'll find them, laundered, later -  
and naturally come sit with me  
and breathe with me and breathe with me.

We'll lay our palms toward the sky

and think a word we find we know  
and let the madness in our minds  
glide off along the river's gentle flow.

So breathe with me, come breathe with me,  
inexorably imbibe it:  
the thing we say we're searching for  
is safely lodged within the human heart.

You'll see your clothes are not the thing  
and neither are your palms or words.  
Some call it God, enlightenment,  
or consciousness or universal love,

or primordial dream, or Jesus,  
or interstellar force; and yet  
the thing is not a subtle thought,  
philosophy, doctrine or method.

It's not an incantation  
and certainly not a password.  
It's just how every thing must be.  
It's nothing and also everything.

So sit with me and breathe with me:  
the rose's heart, the crazy quark,  
the lover's look, the fox's lonely bark,  
the milky way's majestic spiral turn,

are each the thing together and apart.  
Thirty eternal minutes is all you need:  
then you'll dress in sweetly-smelling clothes  
and softly step into the silenced world.

After the message this morning it was impossible to find a better hymn than this one: *There's a wideness in God's mercy.*

Hymn (BPW 573)

There's a wideness in God's mercy  
like the wideness of the sea;  
there's a kindness in his justice,  
which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows  
are more felt than in heaven;  
there is no place where earth's failings  
have such kind judgment given.

For the love of God is broader  
than the measure of man's mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal  
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow  
by false limits of our own;  
and we magnify his strictness  
with a zeal he will not own.

There is plentiful redemption  
in the blood that has been shed;  
there is joy for all the members  
in the sorrows of the Head.

If our love were but more simple,  
we should take him at his word;  
and our lives be filled with gladness,  
from the presence of the Lord.

#### The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;  
the love of God;  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with us all  
now and always. Amen.

#### Sung blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you  
wherever he may send you;  
may he guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you through the storm;  
may he bring you home rejoicing  
at the wonders he has shown you;  
may he bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.

*It's been wonderful to share in worship today; thank you so much for taking part. I pray for God to show you the full extent of his deep love for you during this coming week. And next week will be our communion Sunday, so be sure to find yourself some bread and wine or juice, so we can share in the Lord's Supper as Hearsall at Home.*

## Bible Background Notes 10 5 20

### 1 Peter 2:2-10

Peter's first letter is addressed to various churches in Asia Minor and written in the name of 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ'. Catholic tradition claims this was whilst he was Bishop of Rome - or possibly of Antioch. But, whilst Peter is named as writer at the beginning, Silas is Peter's helper in the writing, as 5:12 says. Some contest Peter's authorship, partly on the grounds that the literary style of its Greek text is far superior to anything that could be expected of a Galilean fisherman. But if he was assisted in the composition by Silas, we can still argue for Peter's authorship. At some points in the letter we get a sense of a man remembering Jesus' ministry. For example 1 Peter 2:12 is very reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:16 and such moments in the letter smell of authenticity.

This is a circular letter addressed to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. This might have been the circular route in Asia Minor (now Turkey) along which the letter would be shared.

The letter is written to Christians experiencing persecution, as 1:6 makes clear. A theme of *enduring suffering for the sake of an everlasting hope* is explored in the letter. Peter exhorts his listeners to respond to suffering with joy, holy living, mutual love, positive lifestyles, good citizenship, patient endurance, nonviolent resistance, suffering love and clear consciences. In fact, the experience of suffering should be regarded as a **confirmation** of their faith, and a way of participating in the very suffering of Christ.

The present passage begins with an exhortation that the believers be like babies! Like newborns craving milk, they should crave spiritual milk, now they have tasted that the Lord is good, an apparent reference to Psalm 34:8. What is this spiritual milk? Is it not best interpreted as referring to the free gift of God's grace - we are blessed by God because of Jesus' freely-given favour, not by our own merits? Good behaviour naturally ensues, as this letter makes clear, but that behaviour **follows** the reception of grace. This fits very well with the metaphor of the newborn baby. There is no question of a newborn having to earn milk - it is simply given. Christ is our mother, who feeds us freely. After the freely-given sucking will come the 'growing up', which is an aligning of the life of the believer with the goodness of God.

A note of rejection is sounded in verse 4 - Jesus, the living stone, has been rejected by humans. This is echoed in verse 7, a quote from Psalm 118, where we learn that being rejected was a prerequisite of Christ's saving work. We begin to get the sense that being rejected is integral to Christian experience. His experience of rejection is the very **foundation** of the spiritual house God is building.

Within this metaphorical temple, Christians are built, as living stones, integral to the building. They must be aligned with the cornerstone, which is Christ, who suffered rejection. Perhaps we picture a living community. The metaphor is muddled - Christians are not only living stones, but also a holy priesthood offering sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, animals and other items were given over to God at the Temple. Christians are not sacrificing animals, so what are the spiritual sacrifices alluded to in verse 5? It could be that the suffering of Christians is regarded as a sacrifice worth making for God.

Again, this stone is mentioned now in a quotation from Isaiah 28:16. This is the positive view: a precious cornerstone has been laid and, in trusting him, the Christians will never experience shame. The next quotation is a corrective from Psalm 118:22: it's the **rejected** stone that forms the cornerstone - the stone which defines the lines of the rest of the building. And another quotation from Isaiah (8:14) suggests that unbelievers will stumble and fall because of this stone.

The beautiful language of verses 9 and 10 conclude the lectionary selection. Whilst some reject the message of the suffering Christ, believers accept it and so reveal that they are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession with the calling to praise the one who brought them out of darkness and into light. These ideas suggest that the promises and destiny formerly attributed to the Jewish nation should now be understood as belonging to the Christian church. They are the ones who have accepted the saving power of the suffering servant and the rejected stone. They are special and precious to God. Although they may suffer in the world at large, when they relate to God through Jesus their suffering seems both consistent with Jesus' way, and light compared with the joy and glory of being God's special possession.

To interpret this passage today it's wise to realise that our context is very different indeed. In Britain, it's very rare to experience anything that can really be described as persecution. We are not being fed to lions nor are we at all likely to lose our jobs because of our faith. Even when Christians do face challenges at work about whether their faith allows them to perform certain tasks which equality legislation regards as essential to the role, we should consider whether or not the state has a point.

The whole world is suffering now in the context of covid-19. But this is a very different sort of suffering. Christians suffer with and like everyone else. But what does our faith teach us about suffering that may be of use to the wider world? That suffering is not a punishment from God or anyone else. That the answer to suffering is always loving, inclusive behaviour. That suffering is a doorway to a deeper understanding of God/life/one another. That God himself suffers with all who suffer. That, whilst suffering, we can still experience and share things of unspeakable beauty.

#### John 14:1-14

So, why were the hearts of the disciples likely to be 'troubled?' Within John's narrative world we see the reason at the end of chapter 13. The context is the Last Supper. The betrayer

has been unmasked. The denier has been predicted. Jesus himself had been 'troubled in spirit' in 13:21.

The disciples are told that they believe in God; now they must also believe in Jesus. Verses 2 - 4 appear to give reason why the disciples should not be troubled. They are told that the Father has a house with many rooms. Jesus is going to prepare a place for them. He will return and take them to that place.

I guess we always assume that Jesus refers to a post-mortem heaven here. But is that necessarily what he meant? Could the return refer to the resurrection appearances? Could the rooms be modes of being - living in the utter security of God, 24/7? Jesus says the disciples know the way to the place where he is going.

Thomas plays the part of the regular listener, expressing our confusion well. We don't know where he's going, so how can we know the way? Without a sense of a destination it's very hard to choose a route.

Jesus' reply is well-known. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Is this a piece of mysticism? The key is to go through Jesus, whatever that means. My interpretation is that this means by trusting in the freely-given love of God, Jesus shows that God is a loving Father, not a petty, exacting tyrant. This interpretation is supported by verse 7, that by knowing Jesus, disciples will know and see 'my Father' as well.

This time Philip gets to play the stooge. Show us the Father - that will be enough for us. Jesus' answer is challenging. Does Philip not know Jesus after all this time? To see Jesus IS to see the Father. So we get another piece of mysticism in verse 10: I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. Existence is nested - but A nesting in B does not preclude B nesting in A. Is it the intimate, trusting relationship itself being explored here? Verse 11 echoes this - trust in this trusting relationship between Jesus and the Father. Or else look at the 'works'. Does this mean the miraculous consequences of his intimate trust in Father God? I imagine it does. So Jesus is saying: Look at the nature and quality of my own relationship with God. That's the key to life itself. And if you can't see that, look at the way that leads to results - miracles, transformation, life, forgiveness etc.

Verses 12 - 14 explore what this means for Jesus' followers. If we enter this believing relationship, then we will do even greater 'works' - because Jesus is 'going to the Father'. Does that mean that Jesus dies and we continue the work because he's just chilling with the Father now and leaves us to get on with it? Does it mean that his relationship with the Father is now so close and intimate that it unleashes power for us? Do we see Jesus' modus operandus ratified on the cross and through his resurrection and ascension, so we now know for sure that we can trust his way? If we live in this relationship of trust, nothing will be beyond us!

Some words from Jean Vanier:

*"In all cultures, and at all times, people heard in some way the voice and word of God: Noah, Abraham, the Hebrew prophets and holy people in Israel, but also Socrates and holy people in India, China, the Americas and other cultures. God never forgot God's people, never left*

*them on their own. The darkness never overcame the light of God that continued to burn in people's hearts and minds. Maybe some could not name God, but they sought the light of truth and the origin of all things. The word of God was the light for many people. When the Word became flesh, Jesus brought to fulfillment all these different paths to God. He does not destroy them; the Word is in each of these paths."*

Jean Vanier, Drawn into the mystery of Jesus.

Jesus is the Way means - he's found the way of living - an instinctive trust in the love of God - not a set of words or the right doctrine. This is what's so liberating about Jesus. He's **not** giving a formula, or a password or an incantation or a mysterious secret. He's saying: God's in me right now... And God is in you right now. Just trust this and live by it and you'll be fine. That's your room within the Father's house!

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer died at the hands of the Nazis at the end of the second world war. He wrote these words from prison:

*"During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a homo religiosus, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man...I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!) a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian." And: "My fear and distrust of 'religiosity' have become greater than ever here. The fact that the Israelites never uttered the name of God always makes me think, and I can understand it better as I go on."*