

Last week Sarah, our daughter had her 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. For Alison and myself each birthday reminds us how grateful we are that she is alive. Just before her first birthday she was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer from which many children don't survive. As we faced the possibility of losing a child some of the older members of the church where I was vicar began to share about the brothers and sisters they had lost as children. I was struck how, in just a couple of generations, our societies perception had changed from a position where childhood death was accepted as being within normal expectation, to one where it was perceived as an extreme tragedy. This is not to say that the pain of losing a child for a parent at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been any less than that towards the end of the century, but that the expectation that this grief could be avoided had increased as medicine improved and childhood mortality decreased markedly.

On Friday we commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE day and I was struck by the stories of those who struggled to join in the rejoicing because their sons and daughters had not returned – many of whom would have first lost children at birth and now had also lost those who had grown up. I am old enough to be a baby boomer and it struck me how quickly life has moved on so that, for my generation and beyond, death prior to old age has become a tragic intrusion rather than a commonplace experience. Since the Second World War peace across Europe has kept warfare away from these shores and medicine has now dealt with many illnesses that used to be incurable.

The optimism of my generation that humanity always moves forward – things will always get better is now crumbling: We are just getting used to the idea that the extravagance of our throw away society is destroying our planet and that financial security will be less for the upcoming generations then, on top of all that, we have been hit by Covid-19 – an illness for which science currently doesn't have an answer and which will probably claim many more lives and shape the way we live for some time to come.

So, if so many of the certainties in life have been eroded away – is there any good news?

The evening before Jesus died was also a time when many of the certainties for his disciples had been eroded away - Peter, who believed himself strong and dependable had just been told that he was going to betray Jesus – and now Jesus was about to be crucified. This is the context in which we hear today's reading begin with Jesus saying: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me."

When Jesus said "Do not let your hearts be troubled –He was addressing a group of people who were already very troubled.

In the face of everything about to go completely pear shaped – Jesus tells them to look beyond the evidence and continue to trust.

"Trust in God, Trust also in me" shows the connection between the Father and the Son but perhaps also encourages them to bring their knowledge of what God had done in the past into the present. The story of God's people in the Old Testament was a story of repeatedly being in a position where there was no earthly way of things working out – and only then– when they were beyond any hope - did they find God's solution. (eg Abraham promised an inheritance when he

was old and had no children, God providing food in the desert when they were going to starve, etc.).

Now Jesus, who is one with the Father encourages them to see that trusting in him will work the same way. Events will unfold so that it will seem as if Jesus promises are equally unable to be fulfilled -when their trust in him will be pushed to the limit and beyond - but they are to hold their nerve and discover the reality of his promises – this is what will keep their hearts secure.

The two big questions that the disciples would have been asking as Jesus went to be crucified and even brave Peter had proved inadequate were:

1. Could God still be working good in this horrendous situation?
2. Given that they too had proven inadequate – had they blown it with him?

Jesus had already answered the first by telling them to hang on and they would see God's victory even in this mess. The answer to the second comes with a simple reassurance – “there's loads of space for you with God”

So how should we understand this idea of “In my Father's house are many rooms!” The problem is that it makes heaven sound a bit like a glorified travelodge or student hall of residence –but Jesus is saying something much better than that.

Right back in Chapter 2 Jesus had referred to the Temple as “My Father's House”. Then, very soon after that, he identified himself with the temple. The Father's house is the place where God himself is.

The word we translate “Room” meant place of rest. So what Jesus wants those of us who are feeling inadequate, or vulnerable, or that we have let him down, to hear is that there is loads of space in the presence of God's love for you and me. Even if we, like Peter, falter at the crucial time – that place remains there for us.

The crucifixion looks like God's great defeat: Not only is Jesus killed but at the cross his followers are shown to be weak and vulnerable.

But the death which looked like the end of every possible hope was followed by His resurrection. The apparent defeat became God's opportunity as it enables Jesus to go away and prepare an eternal place for us with His Father and also to return by His Holy Spirit and equip us to live for him on earth, before being led through the journey of death to the place in the Love of God already set aside for us.

Thomas voiced the confusion that the disciples clearly still had about what Jesus was promising when he asked: “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus reply makes it clear that heaven is not so much a place – but a relationship – a relationship with God through Jesus. He himself is the way, the truth and the life

He is the way – In his life and teachings Jesus demonstrated how to live by Kingdom values in the power of the Spirit –

He is the truth – he is about to be slandered and accused of blasphemy – but his claims for himself in his humanity and deity stand up and will be vindicated by his resurrection.

He is the life. Ironically it is through his death that he is able to rise again - become Lord of the Spirit and fill us with true life. We don't need to wait for death till we start living in heaven - that begins the moment we invite Jesus, by His Spirit, to take his position as Lord of our hearts and lives – only then do we begin to truly live.