

Last week, Jane spoke about the gap within ourselves – the gap between the person we want to be, the person we want others to see and the person God created us to be. You need look no further than today's readings to understand what she meant. The collective gap preventing the disciples being the people God created them to be is irrevocably closed when Jesus is taken up into heaven.

Think back for a moment and remember the fear the disciples had as they hid in a locked room after Jesus's crucifixion. Remember their timidity when none of them dare ask who Jesus was, as he cooked them fish on the lake shore. Remember Peter's hurt and anguish when he was asked a third time if he loved Jesus, despite already having done so twice.

We are created by Love for love which is why one of the taglines you have heard from me so often is that God loved us first and our response should always be to learn to live loved. For me that is exactly what the disciples do as they see Christ ascend. Their fear that Christ is lost to them is mysteriously transformed into a realisation that his departure from their lives is actually the best news possible and instead of mourning their loss they return to Jerusalem with great joy to worship Jesus.

When I sat down to decide how best to illustrate this change in the disciples, my thoughts as they so often do, turned to the musical, Les Mis. The lyrics of two songs kept popping into my mind.

Firstly, the lyrics from Red and Black. The words are those of Marius singing about Cosette, the love he fears is lost to him. But imagine, if you will, that the words are those of Peter speaking about Jesus.... Here's the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse in full:

*Had you seen him today  
You might know how it feels  
To be struck to the bone  
In a moment of breathless delight!  
Had you been there today  
You might also have known  
How your world may be changed  
In just one burst of light!  
And what was right seems wrong  
And what was wrong seems right*

Because, for sure the world changed that day, not only for the disciples, but also for the whole of humankind. For the disciples, their world has changed in just one burst of light, and what was right seems wrong and what was wrong seems right. It seems so right that they leave that mountain side praising Christ with great joy.

Christ's resurrection, amazing though that was, had failed to capture their full understanding and belief that Jesus was the Son of God. It is only after the ascension that the disciples become the people that God created them to be; to become the fledgling body of Christ known as the Church which has subsequently proclaimed and preached the good news of Jesus Christ for two thousand years.

In those lyrics I see Peter being struck to the bone with the realisation that to love you have to let go and to let go is to love. I see John realising that true love is patient, kind and never fades

or fails. I see Thomas laughing not only at his naivety about not knowing where Jesus was going but also at his good fortune that Jesus was personally preparing a guest suite for Thomas's own arrival in due course.

The ascension affirmed to them the truth of Jesus's teaching that everything that had been written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms was true. It marked the end of Jesus's earthly experience and the start of his role as advocate and intercessor sitting at the right hand of God, paving the way for all of us after our earthly lives end to enter God's heavenly kingdom.

The opening line of Red and Black is:  
*It is time for us all to decide who we are*

I'm sure that Peter and all those with him who witnessed Christ's ascension now knew who they were because the gap which Jane spoke about had closed. Knowing who they were to be: Jesus's witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And this is where the second of the songs I mentioned, *Suddenly you're here*, moves the story of Christ's Ascension onwards and upwards. The words are those of the hero Jean Val Jean, telling of the wonderful change in his life brought about after meeting Cosette. Once again, let's imagine, the words being spoken by Peter:

*How was I to know at last  
That happiness can come so fast?  
Trusting me the way you do  
I'm so afraid of failing you.*

*Nevermore alone, nevermore apart  
You have warmed my heart like the sun.  
You have brought the gift of life  
And love so long denied me*

*Suddenly I see what I could not see  
Suddenly the world seems a different place  
Somehow full of grace, full of light  
Something suddenly has begun*

And what begun, of course, was the fledgling church. The fledgling church which focussed on love, prayer, worship and pastoral care of others, providing a setting in which people could start to close the gap between their true and false self and to experience Jesus in their daily lives.

Core to that fledgling church was the understanding that every time they shared their love with another, they were making Jesus present to that person or to put it another way as I've quoted from Les Mis before: to love another person is to see the face of God.

What about today? When I tell folk I am a Christian, do they see Jesus? When I minister to others, do they see Jesus? Does my presence help to make the world seem a different place? As Jane might have asked last week, do folk see my true self who God created me to be or the false self I created for them to see?

The ascension narrative ends with two men dressed in white asking the disciples why they were looking into the sky. We don't know what the disciples said in reply, but we do know what they finally understood....that when your true self reveals Christ fully then the world suddenly seems a different place, somehow full of grace and full of light. And what was right seems wrong and what was wrong seems right.

You might say, the eyes of their heart had been opened

[Song open the eyes of my heart, Lord]

**Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 21 May 2023**