

HOMILY 10TH MAY 2020

TEXTS: John 14:1-14; 1 Peter 2:2-10

One of the joys of travel is to find interesting and unexpected discoveries. So it was, that in the Spring of 1989, as my friend Dorothy and I explored the backroads of England and Wales, we made many such delightful discoveries.

On this journey, we spent a night in a village inn at Sleaford, south of Lincoln, that we had picked out of the listing of B&B's because it was advertised as being near a windmill and of having a parrot named 'Arthur'! The next day as we began winding our way across the flatlands of The Fens towards Norwich, we sighted a perpendicular church tower that stuck out in the flat plains like a wheat silo does in the Mallee. It was visible for miles, a great square tower, that dwarfed the church from which it arose.

When we reached it, we found that it was the tower of St Botolph's Church in Boston, a little port town on the River Witham. This was the port from which many early explorers of Australia had left on their voyages, as had the Pilgrim Fathers when they set off for America.

We were taken on a guided tour of the church and discovered that the tower was 83 metres high (272 feet) and is nicknamed the Boston Stump. What really interested me was that during the Second World War, a beacon was attached to the tower to guide in the Allied bombers as they flew back from bombing missions over Germany and occupied Europe.

For instead of flying the most direct route back from Europe across the southern coastline of England to the airfields in Lincolnshire and central England, many of the bombers flew the long route north back along the east coast of England, past Kent and Norfolk, before turning west across 'The Wash' and inland past Boston. They did this to try to shake off any following enemy fighter planes and to avoid attracting enemy action to the cities and towns of southern England.

The beacon on the Boston Stump was the guiding light that showed them that they were on the right track, and helped them navigate to the bases. The beacon was never put out through the long years of the war as it was a vital aid to aircrews. Many of the planes had damaged navigational instruments by the time they limped back from Europe, they needed the light to show them the way home.

I recalled that beacon this week, as I read those words of Thomas as he questioned Jesus. Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5) Jesus replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me. If you know me, you will know my Father also." (John 14:6-7a)

Let's think for a moment about the context of this incident. Jesus realises that his death is close at hand. He has washed his disciples' feet, shared the last supper with them, and foretold his betrayal by Judas. He has tried to prepare his disciples for his coming death, but they are troubled and afraid. They struggle to comprehend what he means, and to understand the necessity for his death. They are also afraid for themselves.

What will happen to us? How will we manage? They cannot understand what he means by coming again. The resurrection is not something that they were able to anticipate, for nothing like it has ever happened before. They do not understand that Jesus is the Son of God, who will return to God's presence when his time on earth is over.

To them he is a dear friend and teacher. They are yet to understand that he is very much more. Jesus is trying to teach them about himself, but also about God. For the God they have learnt about in the Jewish faith is the God of the Law and commandments. The God who demanded strict obedience to the Law, and the making of sacrifices to placate the divine wrath as they continually failed the impossible demand to be fully obedient.

But Jesus, God's own Son, who is close to the Father's heart, is pointing them, and us, to the God who wants to be in relationship with his people. Who wants us to be God's children.

For the incarnation (God becoming human) changes humanity's relationship with God, and God's relationship with humanity. The tangible presence of God's love for the world is present in Jesus, and this love is about to be spilled out in Jesus' life blood on the cross. A love so deep that it holds nothing back from what is needed to restore the relationship between God and humanity.

The disciples could not understand this, despite Jesus' best efforts to teach them, but by the time John writes down these words in his Gospel, the fledgling church is beginning to comprehend the power and love spelt out in these words.

To the early church, and to all Christians since, it is a joyful, world-changing theological affirmation. God is now longer distant and unable to be reached or comprehended or known. For God has been made known to them, and us, in Jesus Christ who shows them, and us, the way to God. This way is by relationship with Jesus Christ, not by trying to obey the mind-boggling and impossible demands of the Jewish Law. The way to God is through faith in Jesus Christ who shines like a beacon of hope and liberation and salvation. Shining across the darkness of the world. A light that is never hidden nor unavailable, but which is present in the darkest nights that the sinfulness and brokenness of the world can bring.

The early church of the time when John was compiling his Gospel knew about darkness, for they were beginning to experience persecution. They were in conflict with both the Jewish authorities and with the pagan Roman world. As they sought to carve out a place for themselves in a hostile world, it was vital for them to hold onto this acclamation of Jesus as the incarnated Son of God who goes ahead of them to the Father (God). He was not deserting them, but rather was providing for them a way to God.

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." John 14:2-3

These words have been of immense comfort to countless millions of those who face suffering and death. This is why this passage is so often read at funerals, where the reality of death must be faced. These words are comforting because they are not mere words, but are the promises of God. Promises that are true and faithful and can be trusted, even in the darkest times.

One particularly dark time is war, and the situations that people faced in war have often tested them greatly. I read a book called 'Women Beyond the Wire' which gave an account of a group of women and children held in captivity by the Japanese on Sumatra during World War II. The group included women of Australian, Dutch, English and Eurasian backgrounds. Some had been nurses, or missionaries, or society ladies in Singapore, or the wives or daughters of planters or business men. But all, whatever their background, suffered incredible deprivation, starvation, disease and ill-treatment whilst in captivity. Less than half survived. Their stories contain incredible suffering, but there were also incredible stories of courage, leadership, resourcefulness, even fun and laughter and creativity, and faith.

Margaret Dryburgh, a Presbyterian missionary, is one of those who was often mentioned with admiration in the survivor's accounts. Margaret provided spiritual leadership from the beginning of their captivity. She ran morning and evening prayers, cared for the sick and the dying, and presided at funerals. She had a great gift for music and could transcribe many pieces of music from memory or even from someone humming a tune. Some of these pieces of music that she transcribed from memory were very complex classic pieces. This gift and her perfect pitch enabled choirs to be formed that learned to sing this music.

She wrote poetry, and she wrote the hymn that is printed at the end of this homily, 'The Captive's Hymn' in 1942. 'The Captive's Hymn' was sung by the women every Sunday, even throughout their later years in captivity when they encountered suffering and death all around them. When, in 1943, some internees were repatriated from Palembang to Singapore, the hymn was taken with them and, as a result, it found fame in camps there too. The hymn stands as a memorial to her faithful example to all the women and children in the camps, and to her captors.

Margaret's faith in Jesus Christ, and her courage and compassion shone like a beacon into the darkness of the living hell she inhabited. Her life, lived in imitation of Christ, echoed and showed the love of God in the face of human evil. She was given what she needed by God in Jesus to bring courage and hope to those around her.

As God's people, we are called to trust in God and to seek to shine with the light of Christ into the darkness of the world. We are called to be Christ's true servants and imitators like Margaret who lived her life with faith, courage and conviction, and to be like the beacon on the Boston stump that gave guidance on the right way to go. If we do this, we, too, will lead people to God.

The Captive's hymn by Margaret Dryburgh.

Father in captivity
We would lift our prayers to Thee,
Keep us ever in Thy Love.
Grant that daily we may prove
Those who place their trust in Thee
More than conquerors may be

Give us patience to endure
Keep our hearts serene and pure,
Grant us courage, charity,
Greater faith, humility,
Readiness to own Thy Will,
Be we free or captive still

For our country we would pray
In this hour be Thou her stay.
Pride and selfishness forgive,
Teach her, by Thy Laws, to live,
By Thy Grace may all men see,
That true greatness comes from Thee .

For our loved ones we would pray
Be their guardians, night and day,
From all dangers, keep them free,
Banish all anxiety.
May they trust us to Thy care,
Know that Thou our pains dost share.

May the day of freedom dawn
Peace and justice be reborn,
Grant that nations loving Thee
O'er the world may brothers be,
Cleansed by suffering, know rebirth,
See Thy Kingdom come on earth.