Sermon: Fifth Sunday of Easter 7 May (A)

[informal comments on yesterday’s stupendous Coronation]

Like many Anglican clergy I have a slightly ambiguous relationship with the monarchy. Whilst acknowledging that King Charles is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith to whom all clergy swear allegiance at their ordination, the image of the Church presented yesterday is not one that sits easily with me. There is a danger that the Church can appear as marginal to people’s lives as the Royal Family sometime appear remote. The church is not as rich as the copes on display yesterday suggest, and Jesus’ gospel is not as comfortable and easy, as the rich and powerful would wish.

Yet, in King Charles, we have a person of faith who embraces not simply Christianity but all genuine enquiries after the divine, regardless of the culture and context in which they have evolved. I readily admit that King Charles knows a great deal more, and has a great deal more experience, of other faiths than I will ever gain.

Which brings me to this morning’s gospel, part of which has been used repeatedly down the centuries to claim an exclusivity for Christianity to the detriment of all other faiths.

“I am the way, the truth and the life’, says Jesus. ‘No one comes to the Father except through me.’

If you hear this text as Jesus asserting for Christianity, an exclusive access to God, one runs the risk of presenting Jesus as the partisan leader many hoped he would be and for which he was eventually killed.

Jesus is not partisan in any faith sense whatsoever, as surely is evident from his own identity as a Jewish teacher. Jesus represented a non-religious, non-sectarian approach to faith, clearing the decks of prejudice and presumption to provide all with direct access to God.

See me, see God, says Jesus. And if that is problematic, see the works God does in me and in others, and see God.

Later this month we will celebrate the Ascension, that moment of great theology in which Jesus of Galilee became the universally available Jesus of the world, dispenser of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is one of the most radical moments in the narrative of our faith, and perhaps the least recognised of our major festivals. It is a crucial moment in which Jesus, born at a specific moment in history and in a specific context and culture, becomes the Jesus of the world. He ceases to belong to the disciples, and belongs to us all instead.

All people of faith and goodwill have a place in the heart of Jesus, the heart of God. May none of us be so insecure in our faith or so arrogant in our perspective to deny others the reality of their faith experience and tradition.

For a broader understanding of this passage, we need to turn to its very beginning and very end. John 14 begins with those words so familiar from many a funeral service – *Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.*

At the root of all faith, lies trust and at the root of all trust, lies humility. Humility is that quality, that virtue, that recognises the limitations to human endeavour, the limitations to human independence.

By acknowledging our helplessness, our frailty, our need, we open the door to trusting in something else, and are led to faith.

There are many false gods and false dawns of course in a culture like ours that is riddled with temptations. The sheer volume of day time adverts for gambling web sites deeply disturbs me. So it is important to identify wholesome routes to wholeness, and the teachings of Jesus have proven worthy countless times, for countless millions.

Faith journeys often begin when people reach the very nadir of their lives, when everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong.

This is where the end to our gospel reading is so important. When you reach the point at which you know your need of God, you must ask Jesus, God, for help. ‘If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it’.

We have a tendency to turn those words into a shopping list of immediate or ideal needs: health, money, success, positive interview outcome. I’ve even heard of people praying for a car park space!

I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind. Rather, turn your mind to our first reading from Acts which records the death of Stephen, the church’s first martyr who we celebrate each Boxing Day, 26th December. In this short passage two prayer requests are suggested: strength to endure for Stephen, and forgiveness for Saul, later our St Paul of course, one of his persecutors.

When we run out of our own strength to cope with one situation or another, it is invariably because of a situation we face that needs strength beyond our resources or forgiveness beyond our will.

Humility in the face of darkness helps to open our heart to asking God for the strength to trust in the divine; and it is that simple request for help that leads to faith.

You will remember perhaps, the story in Mark of the man who came to Jesus with a much-troubled son who kept throwing himself into the fire. Jesus said: “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaims, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

On this Coronation weekend when so many eyes see the church at work at the heart of the State, may this be our prayer for ourselves, our churches, and all in our communities. For belief in God is a journey and everyone here and in our communities are at different stages on this journey of discovery. None of us have all the answers, some of us are hesitant even about the questions. But religious and secular alike can often join together in this simple prayer:

“We do believe, help our unbelief.” Amen.