

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 8th May 2005

John 14:6

Theme

Our present-day culture calls for us to be all tolerating – which often amounts to a lack of serious conviction. However, believers in Christ are called to be “a particular people” who follow and champion the distinctive way found in Jesus.

Introduction

Let’s go back a few days... On Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, 40 days after Easter and preceding the Feast of Pentecost, an existing Jewish Feast that occurred 50 days after Passover.

We rejoice in that next week on Pentecost Sunday. On the occasion of that Feast Day in Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit was given to the believers in a dramatic way that had been spoken of by prophets but never yet experienced in that way.

Our readings today have focused us on the Ascension. As I said two weeks ago, rather than repeat my sermon of Ascension Day, I planned to preach today on the words spoken by Jesus, recorded in John’s Gospel, prior to his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Jesus has ascended to heaven, his purpose for being on earth as part of humanity being a completed task. Amongst the tasks given to those who believe in Jesus, is to follow the way of Jesus. Perhaps we should rephrase that: It is not just one task amongst many – it is the primary task!

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life”, he said.

Many years ago, Julia first used a phrase that now crops up easily in our household: “high cringe factor”. I clearly remember that it was in relation to the start of “talkback radio” some 15 years ago. A station in JHB – Channel 702 – changed its focus to being virtually an all-talk-radio format. And it was an exciting, novel thing to have callers phoning in and expressing their opinions, usually in response to specific issues, perhaps with a guest in the studios; sometimes just in response to the news of the day.

In a society starved of that kind of expression for so long, many people including myself revelled in it! (Being the shy, retiring fellow that I am) I nevertheless took the opportunity on several occasions to phone in with my own comments on certain heated topics.

Anybody could say anything. And Julia soon stopped listening. She couldn’t bear what she felt were the “inane comments” many people made (myself excepted, of course! J),

and described talkback radio as being something with a very high cringe factor. It set her all on edge, and she quickly switched off.

Sometimes we in the church experience our own Christian cringe. We do not wish to give up being Christian, but we are at times a bit embarrassed about it. We are especially embarrassed about Christian claims to exclusivity or ultimate truth. And because of that, there are sections of John's gospel including today's reading in particular, that cause us to sense a high cringe factor.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

A Baptist pastor, Nathan Nettleton, has said, the problem we have with hearing that statement from Jesus is that it is not actually Jesus we have usually heard it from. We have heard it from fiery eyed zealots who use it as a weapon to bludgeon their opponents into submission and as a proof that everyone who doesn't share their view of Jesus is going straight to hell; people whose arrogant fanaticism we shy away from.

We live in a culture that says the way to peace and harmony is found in treating everybody's beliefs as equally worthy, and attempts to persuade anybody to change his or her beliefs are disrespectful. We are understandably anxious to avoid being associated with any sort of Christian supremacist ideologies. Religious intolerance in general, and within the church in particular given parts of its institutional history, has a lot to answer for. We rightly do not want to be associated with all that.

But if we allow that concern to prevent us from hearing this saying of Jesus we may be cutting off our nose to spite our face. We are allowing those who try to force it to say what they want it to say, to dictate whether we will listen to it for what it might really be trying to say.

It is certain that when this saying was first uttered and when it was first written down, it was not attempting to answer anybody's questions about the value of other religions or the fate of their adherents. To take any statement out of its context and try to get it to answer entirely different questions in a completely different context is to risk distortion.

If we want to hear what is being said when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me," then we need to hear it in the context of John's gospel.

Jesus is speaking to his closest followers in private, immediately before his arrest and all that followed. They faced the uncertainty of life without him around, and are not sure if they've got what it takes to continue in the way he has shown them. Peter thinks he probably does, but Jesus then told him that within hours he'd be pretending he'd never heard of Jesus.

When John compiled his Gospel account, finalised a few decades after all these events, much had changed. John was writing for a Christian community who had been forced

out of their home within Judaism, and who are under increasing pressure to give up the distinctive claims of their faith and conform to the religious norms of their day.

In the midst of that, Jesus' words are addressing questions of Christian identity; of what it means to be followers of Jesus. Analysis of where the faithful adherents of other religions might be at is not even being thought of here!

It seems that our situation is increasingly like that of those to whom these words were addressed. Gone are the days when Christianity was the taken-for-granted dominant religious worldview. Those were the days of Christian triumphalism that sometimes produced the arrogant mind-set we are so wary of. Increasingly we are again finding ourselves to be adherents of a minority faith in a world awash with different values and beliefs. And again the prevalent temptation is to suppress our Christian distinctiveness in favour of a broadly inclusive humanitarianism in order to win us the privilege of being considered respectable contributors to society.

And so it is to us, as we wrestle with how to live as people of love and faith and peace and justice in the world we find ourselves in, that Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me." He did not address these words to the Hindus or the Muslims or even to those Jews who did not believe in him.

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were anxious and uncertain about the way forward. "I am the way. Follow me."

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were confused about what to believe. "I am the truth. Believe in me."

He addressed them to those of us who were already his followers and who were fearful for the future. "I am the life. Live in union with me."

"None of you comes to the Father except through me." Only through one who knows God as Father, can you come to know God as Father. Far from being an arrogant claim that negates every other way of relating to God, it is an obvious statement about a particular way of relating to God: If you want to approach God in the same unique and unprecedented manner that Jesus did, then you'll have follow him to do it. No one but Jesus can show you how Jesus does it.

A couple of points need to be made in light of that. Firstly, that reading of the verse does not assert the supremacy of Christian faith over other faiths. However, it also does not say that everyone is free to choose their own pathway to God and that all faiths are therefore equally valid. It simply says that the passage is not addressing that question; so don't try to get it to answer it. We do live in an unprecedented multi-faith world. The reason the Christian worldview is no longer taken for granted is that it is no longer the only worldview people grow up knowing. There are multitudes of worldviews with competing claims for the hearts and minds of the people and the shape and direction of society.

But, secondly, it is in the face of such pluralism that Jesus says to us who have identified ourselves with him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. None of you comes to the Father except through me.”

It is not our job to discern whether or not faithful Buddhism offers a genuine way to life in God. It is our job to live faithfully the way we have been called to follow. And faithfully taking the way of Jesus is done by following Jesus. Faithful following of the way of Jesus will not make us hostile to people of other faiths or no faith, but it will make us distinctly and boldly different from them. It may even evoke some hostility from them.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be seeking above all else depth and intimacy of friendship with God and one another, and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the more prevalent quests for image, power and prosperity.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be growing into a radical hospitality that welcomes the stranger as an icon of the risen Christ and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the selfish and xenophobic stance we sometimes hear from society around us.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be investing in treasures of the spirit, and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the growing obsession with wealth and prestige.

Whereas, if we just bow to the pressure to suppress the distinctive beliefs and values of our faith, and act as though all faiths are essentially just differently clothed versions of the need to respect and be nice to each other, then we will not be following the radical way of Jesus, but the lowest common denominator approach of the current fashion for do-it-yourself spirituality.

The fashionable idea that the ultimate way, truth and life will be found by each person taking whatever best suits their own personality and needs from the various faiths on offer is a recipe for confusion. Using this wonderful analogy: It’s like trying to replace the wheels on your car with the legs of a horse. You can choose to go by horse without denying that cars are legitimate means of transport. But if you’re embarrassed that your horse isn’t a car, go get a car; don’t try chopping them up to mix and match their body parts.

What we are doing when we gather here is unapologetically an endeavour to faithfully follow Jesus and no other. We listen to the scriptures that have shaped the Christian tradition, with the words of the prophets, apostles and Jesus himself, so that we might be shaped in that tradition. We gather around this table as the body of Christ, in the power of his Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of his Father so that we might be fed and strengthened and inspired to live our whole lives as the body of Christ, in the power of his Holy Spirit, to the glory and praise of his Father. Whether other ways might also lead

to God is not our concern. Our call is to live the way, the truth and the life that have been made known to us in Jesus. And there's no "high cringe factor" in that!