

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church
Houston, TX
10 May 2020

John 14:1-11

Eric Clapton, which I believe to be one of the best guitarists alive today, had a series of tragedies in 1990 and 1991 that defined his music and his life forever. In August of 1990, his manager and best friend died in a helicopter accident. Then seven months later, his son, Connor, only 4 years old, fell 50 floors to his death while visiting a family friend in New York city. After this last tragedy, Clapton retired from the world for about 7 months, totally consumed by his great pain. By the time he came back into the scene, Clapton's music had changed, it was softer, more reflective, more powerful than it had ever been. Be the end of 1991 Clapton released the following song about his boy's death (Written by Clapton and Will Jennings):

Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?
Would it be the same if I saw you in heaven?
I must be strong and carry on,
'Cause I know I don't belong here in heaven.

Would you hold my hand if I saw you in heaven?
Would you help me stand if I saw you in heaven?
I'll find my way through night and day,
'Cause I know I just can't stay here in heaven.

Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees.
Time can break your heart, have you begging please, begging please.
Beyond the door there's peace I'm sure,
And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven.

Loss and hardship affect of all of us, slow us down, make us more reflective. Each and everyone of us become very different people after coping with a great tragedy. Many lose their faith and give up trying to pursue a relationship with God. Many use the experience to reflect on what's truly most important in their lives and re-create themselves into more reflective, more faithful, more connected people. The same experience of pain can lead some to despair, and some to new faith and renewed hope.

We have known this very well over the last eight or nine weeks. We have lost so many people to this Pandemic! I am thinking of my friend Father William Barnwell, a dedicated priest, author, and social advocate who was my partner in prison ministry at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola) who died to Covid-19 several weeks back. I am

thinking of a mutual friend of my wife and I who succumbed to depression and suicide two weeks ago, after becoming overwhelmed with his life in this Covid-24/7-World. I am thinking of all my friends who have lost relatives and spouses to this virus.

Jesus knows this reality well. The passage in today's Gospel takes place during Jesus' farewell speech. This is a bit strange because for the last 4 weeks we have read passages from resurrection Sunday and the week after the resurrection, but today we go back to the upper room, during the last supper. Jesus knows that his trial is imminent, he knows that he will suffer, die, be buried, and rise again. He also knows that he will never relate to his disciples in the same way until his Second coming. He knows that many of his disciples will lose their faith, lose their way, go back to their former lives, believe that the truth they heard and shared with him was just a lie. He knows that the great tragedy of his passion will lead some to deeper faith in him, and others to absolute despair, loss of faith, and hopelessness.

Jesus takes the time to comfort them today. He says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." "Believe" in this context is much more than just intellectual assent. Believe here means to trust, to put your whole confidence in him, to become convinced that Jesus is not really gone, but rather, that through his resurrection, he has become the eternally-present-one. Jesus uses a well known image to present this theme. He says, "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?" Many have understood this promise as a physical dwelling place, with physical dimensions and architectural floor plans, but I believe Jesus is talking about something deeper here. I believe he is talking about relationships.

I imagine Jesus saying, "I am going to the Father to mend that broken relationship between humanity and God. I am going to repair the bridge through my death and resurrection. I am going to my death that you may be in me and I may be in you, just as the Father is in me and I am in him. I am going to prepare the space where your relationship with God may grow. And when the time has come, I will come again and I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. Pain and anguish no longer have to overwhelm you and cause you to lose faith in God. Tragedy no longer has to rob you of your hope of eternity. Loss no longer has to crush your soul. Believe in God, believe also in me."

My friends life requires courage. We have learned this the hard way over the last eight weeks. It takes courage to wake-up in the morning, and it takes tremendous courage to pick-up the phone and ask for help. I also believe, however, that life requires faith in Jesus Christ. Somehow it has become unpopular to affirm that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Yet, I believe this deeply. It is okay to say that Jesus is the good news the world needs. What is impossible to say is that we know with any degree of certainty

whom he will save. This is not our job. This is his party and he can invite whomever he wants. For me, faith in Jesus is fundamental to the whole human existence enterprise.

Without faith in Jesus every way becomes “The Way” and we remain as lost as blind mice, in a dark alley, in the middle of the night. Without a proper faith in Jesus every truth becomes “The Truth” and we remain as confused and disoriented as Harold Camping must have felt on May 22, 2011. You may recall how Pastor Camping, an 89-year old evangelist from Oakland, California, predicted that the rapture would take place on the 21st of May, 2011. Can you imagine how confused he must have felt the day after? I can picture him checking and rechecking his calculations, trying to determine where he went wrong with his numerology.

Without faith in Jesus Christ every life becomes “The Life” and we come to believe that life is all about us: we create our own happiness, we are the measure of all goodness, the arbiter of what’s right and wrong, and the creators of our own worlds. We come first, second, and third because it is all about us. Without Jesus of Nazareth we are on our own, and we must fend for ourselves.

But, my friends, the good news for us today is that we are not alone. We are not the hapless victims of random cosmic events. God is in control and, even if we don’t see his loving presence among us during these times of darkness, the good news is that he is here this very day. And he remains for us the good news of God’s love for humanity. He remains the way, the truth, and the life. Those who believe in him have an advocate with God, the Father. Those who believe in him are adopted as children of God, the Father. Those who believe in him are no longer alone and defenseless.

If you or anyone you know have lost your way during this pandemic, have courage today, Jesus is the way and he longs to have a relationship with you. If you have lost your faith, have courage, Jesus is the only faith you need, and he longs to have a relationship with you. If you yearn for truth in this age of competing truths, have courage, Jesus is the only truth you need, and he longs to have a relationship with you.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!