

Reflection - Fifth Sunday of Easter  
07/05/2023  
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Acts 7: 55-60            The stoning of Stephen

Psalms 31:1-5,17-18    In you O Lord I seek refuge

1Peter 2: 11-25    Live good lives to show God

John 14: 1-14    Jesus is the way to the Father

Introduction

Today in the sermon I'd like us to look at obedience. But not an obedience born out of ignorance or fear, rather an obedience which springs from a lively faith.

Jesus' death on the cross freed us from obedience to the law in the old Jewish sense, but if we accept Jesus into our lives, it should be our desire to be obedient to him.

We've heard a lot about obedience in the readings today. Firstly, in Acts we heard of Stephen's obedience. His obedience to a faith which led to his eventual martyrdom. In Peter's letter telling of how followers of Christ should behave, we hear him calling for obedience to civil authorities. And in John's gospel we hear Jesus' calling the disciples to obedience:-

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

Before we look at the readings in a bit more detail, I'd like to read you a definition of obedience, from a little book called *Worldly Virtues*.

"A non-virtue today, to our great loss. Many of us confound obedience with lack of pride, with obsequiousness, servility and other deficiencies. We are willing – in theory – to follow rules, but not individuals. Yet that is self-deception. Rules are not only made, they are enforced by a and embodied in persons: judges, teachers, parents, policemen, bureaucrats and bosses. These are the people we follow, not any abstract norms. If the one whom we follow is inspiring, obedience is sheer joy. We need better leaders, not better laws. Without knowing it, most of us crave obedience. If nothing else, obedience frees us from responsibility. As sacrifice, obedience ennobles. It seldom destroys and often enhances personality."

There was one sentence in the middle of this definition which really grabbed my attention.

“If the one whom we follow is inspiring, obedience is sheer joy.”

Conversely, if there is no respect or love for the one you are trying to be obedient to, then you will find it very difficult to be obedient.

Are we inspired by Jesus? His life, death and resurrection, His teachings, His promises to us?

Obedience is an easy thing to say, but not such an easy thing to do. Unless we are truly inspired by Jesus, we may find it difficult to be obedient to him.

Now let's look a bit more into the readings from our sacred texts today.

### Acts 7:55-60

We don't really know a lot about Stephen, but his martyrdom is well recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. He was a leader within the early Church. He was appointed as one of the seven Deacon's, whose job it was to care for the physical needs of those less fortunate, such as the widows, among the followers of the Way. It was the deacon's job to do this, so as to allow the Apostles to focus on teaching about Jesus and spending their time in prayer.

Despite having what might seem like a more worldly job within the emerging church, Stephen was a deeply committed man to Jesus our Saviour, and this can be seen in his speech to the Sanhedrin before his death.

Stephen wanted everyone to be able to know Jesus like he did.

The significance of Stephen's death has not been lost on the writer of the book of Acts. This writer has also been accredited with writing Luke's Gospel. If you look at Stephen's actions leading to his persecution and death, they are very similar to those of Jesus. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, He saw the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God, as Jesus promised he would be. Stephen committed his spirit to Jesus, just as Jesus commended his to the Father. Stephen also asked for forgiveness for his persecutors, just as Jesus had done. Seeking to act like Jesus is of course the essence of the Christian Life, and the writer strongly emphasizes this.

Just like Jesus was obedient to the father, even obedient unto death on the cross, Stephen in his martyrdom has succeeded in living his life in obedience to Christ.

## 1 Peter 2:11-25

The main purpose of Peter's letter was to encourage suffering Christians. In the section we've heard this evening we hear Peter calling Christ's followers to obedience to Civil Authorities and worldly leaders. The purpose of this obedience is to show others how Christians can live good lives, and thus win others to Christ. Peter is not saying we should be obedient to those in charge in a worldly sense, at the expense of not being obedient to God. Peter himself was in fact thrown into jail for his disobedience, in continuing to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, and he himself ended up dying as a martyr. Peter's message is to encourage others to obedience even though they are suffering, and he gives Jesus as the example.

## John 14:1-14

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus telling his disciples that the only way to the Father is through him.

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

To me this is a very clear call for obedience to Jesus. To accept his teachings and to try to live our lives, using him as our example. But it is so much more than this as well. To be obedient to Jesus is to accept him into our lives. To be obedient we must accept Jesus as the ruler of our lives, and acknowledge him as the only way we can know God.

Let's also now have a look at verse 12:-

"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

This verse used to trouble me. How can we, as Christians do greater things than Jesus, who fed thousands, walked on water, made the blind see, and raised the dead. But I've since realized that the greater things, is to bring others to know Jesus, and bring them to be obedient to him. In his earthly ministry Jesus restricted himself to a very small area in Palestine. In worldly terms he had very few followers. These greater things started with the apostles. We heard in the reading from Acts two weeks ago how on the day of Pentecost 3000 were baptized. In the call for obedience to Jesus, is also the call to share his message of salvation with others.

## Conclusion

As I was considering the results of obedience in preparation for today, I thought about a little poem. It's called Footprints. Some of you may know it well, but I'd like to finish with this poem.

## Footprints

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way, But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me." The Lord replied. "My son, My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you".

In this call to obedience today, I'd like to ask you which God you are trying to be obedient to. A distant God you are scared of, or the God who loves you so much that he would die on the cross for you, the God who promises to be with you always, and if necessary, pick you up and carry you through life's journey.

Amen.