

## The Fifth Sunday of Easter. Reader, Petronella Spivey

“There is no such thing as a stupid question.” How often have you heard that?

Teachers like their pupils to ask questions (at the right time, and on the topic) because it shows that they are listening and thinking about the subject they are being taught.

And in committee work, which is what I spent my professional life doing, a question of ten puts into words the uncertainty that the whole group feels, helping them to clarify their ideas.

The gospel today contains two questions – or near questions – from the disciples. Let’s see what they can clarify in our own minds today.

The gospel comes from John’s account of the last supper. Jesus is giving final teaching to his closest friends. In the preceding chapter, the Master has washed his students’ feet, Judas has slipped out into the dark and Jesus has just foretold Peter’s betrayal.

It’s all a bit unsettling.

Just before the reading we have heard, Jesus told his disciples,

“Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’”

The disciples are starting to feel anxious.

What will happen next?

Where in Jerusalem is Jesus going that they can’t go?

Of course, we know the answer, but they did not and we may recognise the feeling that not knowing is worse than knowing something bad.

The disciples are troubled: they feel the ground shifting under their feet.

Maybe we can sympathise with them a bit about that too. For us, the world order is changing, and we fear that life will be worse for the next generation than it was for us. And many of us are unsettled and disturbed by events closer at home, in our own community or family, or in our own lives.

Jesus spots that the disciples are troubled and he seeks to reassure them. He says “I go to prepare a place for you.... and you know the way to the place I am going”.

It’s meant to be reassuring. Indeed, these are words that are often read at funerals as a comfort to those who mourn.

But it is a mistake to think that this is a promise *just* for a funeral. It’s a promise *for us too*. And to unpick this, let’s look at the questions of Thomas and of Philip and see what we can learn from them.

Jesus says “I go to prepare a place for you.... and you know the way to the place I am going”.

And Thomas replies, perhaps like a clever teenager “we don’t know *where* you are going – *how can we* know the way?”

Thomas’ mistake is to focus on the destination, not the journey.

When Thomas says, we don't know where you are going, how can we know how to get there, his argument does make sense in purely map reading terms. And of course, Thomas doesn't know what will happen later on that evening.

Just think for a moment about the way some Christians emphasise the importance of faith so as to guarantee a place for the believer in heaven after their death. This is to focus on the destination, as if life were a painful journey, and heaven the final prize. You may have heard people talk in terms of heaven as a reward or compensation for the less than heavenly nature of this present life.

This approach naturally leads people to ask detailed questions about what heaven will be like. After all, if there is a price to be paid now – in terms of faith or church attendance or suffering, then you'd want to be sure that the reward was really going to be worth it. You can see this in some of the questions that Jesus gets asked, for example questions like whether Lazarus could pop back from heaven to warn the rich man's brothers, or questions about the heavenly relationships of blended families. Jesus' answer is always that heaven is so far from our imaginings that we just can't imagine it, and that we need to learn trust.

So, when Thomas asks, "we don't know where you are going – how can we know the way." Jesus focusses on the way, not the destination.

Have you ever been stopped by someone in a large town, York say, and asked for directions? And you think for a bit and realise that no one could possibly remember all the twists and turns they will need to make to get across to the other side of the town. So, you tell them the first part of the route and suggest they ask again once they have done that. Might that be a bit like a person who knew the way, but not the destination?

Can Thomas be comforted by knowing the next few turns for now, and that once he has completed those, he can ask again? Can we?

But its more than that. The word for way "hodos" can mean a road (Think of the Whitby Road in Pickering, which is the road **to** Whitby), or it can mean the route, but the Greeks also used it to mean metaphorically a "way" or the "way of life" that implies a set of behaviours. In Acts of the Apostles, the first Jesus-followers called themselves "people of the way". In the times before the writing of the Gospel of John, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle thought of their philosophies as a methodical *hodos*. Jesus is now teaching in the same vein as these philosophers.

So, Jesus is saying to Thomas, you know the way of life you have to follow, and if you do that, you will arrive where you need to be.

Or maybe even, Jesus is telling Thomas, and us too, you know the next single step you have to take, and if you trust me, that will be enough.

Philip's mistake is to think "is that all there is? We just take one step at a time?"

The first time we hear about the apostle Philip is in the first chapter of John's gospel. Jesus visits Galilee and when he finds Philip, he immediately says to Philip, "Follow me." Phillip then turns to his fellow townsman Nathaniel and says "We have found him about who Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote: Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. "

With such an introduction, Philip is surely expecting big things of Jesus, perhaps a vision of God's glory that left his face shining, just as Moses had. Not to wash dirty feet and the instruction to "love one another" that he had heard earlier on at the last supper.

Disappointed with Jesus' answer to Thomas, Philip asks for the biggest thing he can think of. "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied", he says.

We can sympathise with Philip a bit, I think. Sometimes we have no sense that God is there at all: and we wish that he would appear in a cloud of glory and trumpets. Sometimes our prayers go unanswered, and we start to wonder if anyone is listening.

At B&B this week, we heard that Mother Theresa's letters reveal she went through times of feeling cut off from God. Yet she still carried on proclaiming his presence in her work! She wrote to a friend "Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear." What faith to carry on working for God when she did not feel it at all!

"Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," Philip says. "Enough of this route finding, all this talk of love and service, let's get to the good bit."

"This is the good bit," replies Jesus. "When I first found you, I asked you to follow me, to follow in my way. To follow me, is to have a relationship with me, and with my Father."

It's not a set of instructions to get you across town, or a set of rules.

It's not an idea or a philosophy thought up by some wise person.

It is to know Jesus and to be with him, just as Jesus and Philip have been together for the last three years.

And if you will have a relationship with Jesus, you will have a relationship with God, just like Philip wanted.

This is the way to get where you wanted to go.

It really is as simple as that.

In the end of course, we know Thomas got it right. "My Lord and my God" he said to Jesus, when Jesus appeared in a locked room after his death. Thomas saw that the Jesus who he had known was indeed God, and he believed in the resurrection and worshipped him.

And Philip? Well Philip had it right all along. After describing Jesus to Nathaniel, N replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" "Come and see," said Philip. That is what Philip himself did, he came and he saw.

And that is what we should do, come and see when Jesus asks us to follow him. Come and see, today, not later. Come and see now, enter into a relationship with Jesus, follow- in the Jesus' way. Put one foot in front of the other: take the next step, and leave the rest to God. Then we too, will see the Father today, and always, in the place he has prepared for us.