

## “I AM THE WAY” – Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2017

When I hear today’s Gospel read for an ordinary Sunday morning service rather than a funeral service – where the passage is most often heard – I think back to a service in our last parish when we had a visiting speaker from one of the missionary societies to preach.

She got up into the pulpit and started to speak. But very soon into her address her voice got weaker and her words got slower and then she collapsed disappearing from view in the pulpit.

The churchwardens rushed to help her and lift her out down the stairs of the pulpit, which wasn’t easy for she was a rather ample lady. There was nothing I could do except announce the next hymn which happened to be “The Lord’s my shepherd” – another favourite funeral hymn - and it was to the strains of that hymn that she came to, not knowing whether she was on earth or in heaven!

Well, you are not at your own funerals this morning!  
Nor am I going to give a funeral sermon about life after death.

What I want to do is to pick out one phrase of Jesus’ from today’s Gospel – not about the hereafter but very much about the here and now.

And that phrase is “I am the way.”

And the picture that comes into my mind when I hear that phrase, tying in with that recovery hymn our visiting preacher heard, the picture that comes to mind is of Jesus the shepherd.

The big difference between shepherds today and shepherds in Jesus’ day is that in those days shepherds led their sheep from the front rather than from behind.

The early Christians were known as “followers of the way”, followers of Jesus who leads from the front.

Thomas, in our today’s Gospel, was confused. “How can we know the way?” To which Jesus replies, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

“I am the way.”

As Christians we are not so much followers of a code of beliefs and behaviour as we are followers of a person – Jesus. The Creed does not begin, ‘I believe *that.*’ but “I believe *in...*” It’s not a contract but a relationship with God through Jesus.

In our daily lives we try to live the Jesus way, doing and saying to others what we believe Jesus would do and say.

And for our guidance we have the Gospels - the record of Jesus’ life on earth – and the rest of the New Testament where we read of where and how the early Christians lived out their faith.

Canon Ken Kearon, now Bishop of Limerick, who preached at my institution here in St. Peter's three years ago this week, - yes! How time flies when you're having fun! – well, Ken in one of his books wrote this:-

“As Christians, the Bible is our ultimate authority”, but then he made the point that the Bible doesn't give clear moral guidance on every question that we face today. Certainly there are many commands in the Old Testament that are culturally related – e.g. not eating pork or shellfish, not wearing mixed fibres and so on.

And then he said, “When it comes to the New Testament, the words of Jesus are almost, though not entirely, devoid of detailed instructions on what to do and where and when.” So, he concluded, “God's will is not a series of commands; it is that we should love one another.”

The way of Jesus was, and still is, the way of love.

We are given a general principle, we are given examples of how Jesus applied the law of love in his day and then we are left with the challenge of how to live it out in the particular circumstances of our lives today.

Being followers of the way we don't have a detailed rule book, like the rules of the road, the breaking of which incurs penalties and fines and the need to attend 'bad boy – or bad girl's' courses!

No, we are given general guidelines and are required to work these out in our daily lives and in our daily contact with others.

To love in the Christian sense means to show unconquerable good will to others in all situations.

And this is no sloppy emotional feeling but rather a matter of will and effort, that will sometimes mean going against our natural reaction for revenge and retaliation. It will mean having the courage and conviction to stand up and speak out for what is right, even if that is not the most popular thing to do. It means treating people with respect and being willing to forgive. It means honesty and integrity in our dealings with each other.

And above all, it means having **compassion** towards those who are in need.

And as Christian Aid Week begins today we are reminded once again, if we do need reminding, of the huge number of displaced, diseased and despairing people in our world.

A frequent description of Jesus in the Gospels is that he had compassion on those he met, especially those in need. As followers of Jesus, **the Way**, we must likewise be moved to compassion and love.

About 6 months ago, not only sports fans but the general public were moved by a powerful example of love and compassion when triathlon star, Alastair Brownlee, stopped short of the finishing line, to carry his brother Jonny over the line.

The 2 brothers were in the last stretch of the final 10 kilometre race in Mexico last September. Although Alastair was a double Olympic champion, yet his brother Jonny was ahead of him in this race and on course to become world champion. The exhaustion and heat overcame him and he began weaving across the course, dazed and exhausted. Alastair was in 3<sup>rd</sup> place somewhat behind him but put off all thought of winning to put his arm around his brother and almost carry him over the line to get 2<sup>nd</sup> place.

As he was later to remark, “It was a natural to help my brother *but for anyone I would have done the same.*”

That’s love in action, compassion in action.

And in the Gospels we see Jesus stopping to feed the hungry and heal the sick, going out of his way to minister to those in need. We see him confronting hypocrisy and cheating, challenging selfishness and standing up for what is right against those whose motives were base.

Jesus is the way, our headline as to how as his followers we should live our lives.

It is by living the Jesus way that, as Peter says in our epistle, we will be “God’s own people” – chosen not for status and privilege, but for service, so that as he goes on to say, we “may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness to his marvellous light.”

**Jesus said, “I am the way..”** As followers of his way may our wills always be motivated by love and our actions always motivated by compassion.