

Sermon on Sunday 7 May 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Acts 7. 55-end; John 14. 1-4)

Heaven is a place on earth

'I've got shoes, you've got shoes

All of God's children got shoes

*When I get to heaven goin' to put on my shoes, gonna walk all
over God's heav'n, heav'n, heav'n'*

Those words are from the famous Spiritual 'I've got shoes'.

Spirituals, as you'll know, were songs composed by Africans, captured, enslaved and forced to work the plantations of the United States. This stolen people, deprived of their language, families and culture, held on to the one thing their captors could not take from them; their music.

And over the years, as these slaves and their descendants adopted Christianity, they re-shaped this religion of their oppressors into a deeply personal way of dealing with their enslavement. These spirituals, composed mostly in the fields as they worked, were both songs of hope and songs of protest. And often, understandably, within this 'hell' of a life, they sang of a

heaven; a place where finally all would be equal, 'all God's children got shoes'.

Heaven: What's your understanding of heaven, of what if anything comes after life?

Our much-loved gospel reading this morning is often read at funerals, and much comfort is taken from these words of Jesus as he prepares to leave his disciples. 'I go to prepare a place for you,' he says. 'In my Father's House, there are many rooms/dwelling places,' (or, in the more up-market traditional version, mansions!). It's a beautiful image of a place perhaps, a heaven maybe, with room enough for all.

Personally, I take great comfort in the thought of an afterlife. I can't prove anything, of course, and scripture itself doesn't give much away. For me, however, it's important to believe that the love born in this life somehow continues. It's important to me that there will be a reunion of sorts with those I've loved. I also need to believe in a time coming when all will be well, when there will be no more injustice, no more pain; where tears will be wiped away. I see death as but another birth.

When we die, we're received into the arms of our God with as much tenderness and love as we were hopefully received into the arms of our own mothers.

The disciples listening to this farewell speech of Jesus would probably, however, have interpreted this 'Father's House' not as heaven (a shadowy concept at best in Jesus' time), but as the actual Temple in Jerusalem; not as something future, but as something present. The Greek word translated here as 'dwelling place', occurs again later in verse 23, where Jesus says, 'Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home (our dwelling place) with them'. So again, Jesus seems to be talking about the present. Right here, right now, we are in the Father's House.

But what does that mean?

There's a clue earlier when Philip says, 'Just show us the Father,' and Jesus gets uppity. 'Don't you know,' he says, 'that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?' In other words, there is union here with the divine. But he goes even further. In verse 20, he says, 'I am in the Father, and you are in me and I am in you'. Hold on a second! Did he just say that we have that same union with the divine?

If so, then the Father is not out there or up there, but in here, within you, within me. Do we need a moment for that to sink in?

I'm not saying here that you and I are God. Clearly, we're not! I'm saying we are in union; we are one with God.

And if that's true, then there are lots of 'hold on, that means...!'

Hold on, that means that we do not have to search for God, because God is already here and always has been.

Hold on, that means that we are all interconnected.

Hold on, that means that to love ourselves rightly and to love others is in fact an act of loving God. Wasn't it Jesus himself who said, 'Whatever you do for the least, you do for me'? In loving and caring for the next person you meet, you are loving and caring for God.

Hold on, that means that any relationship with the divine is not a private affair. It's corporate. We, everyone, is part of this One body of Christ.

What hurts another, hurts me, hurts God. We must strive therefore always to stand against injustice wherever we encounter it.

If only slave-owners past and present believed that. If only we all believed and lived that truth in our day-to-day relationships, Belinda Carlisle would be right. Heaven could indeed be 'a place on earth'.

Throughout our history, Christians have placed so much emphasis on life after death, to the extent that we have often failed to invest in life before death. In its most dangerous form it's 'Well, it doesn't matter if the planet fries; just means we'll all get to heaven sooner'. Our call, however, is to bring heaven to earth. That's what this Kingdom Jesus banged on about, is; a heaven now where all God's children got shoes.

The next person you meet, I imagine, will have shoes, but there will be something else that they lack, something perhaps that only you can gift them. Because we are part of each other and Christ is the next person you meet.

I can only guess about the mystery that awaits us all when, finally, we take our last breath. Therefore, while we still have breath, may we live to love; the end. Because love, as the apostle Paul tells us in that other great passage read this time at weddings, 'Love is the one eternal thing'.

