

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid

Christopher Robin was going away. Nobody knew why he was going; nobody knew where he was going; indeed nobody even knew why he knew that Christopher Robin was going away. But somehow or other everybody in the Forest felt that it was happening at last.

On the last day before it happened Christopher Robin and Pooh walked to an enchanted place at the very top of the Forest called Galleon's Lap, which is sixty-something trees in a circle. Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was in all the world was with them in Galleon's Lap. Christopher Robin said, 'Pooh, when I'm – you know – when I'm not here anymore, will you come up here sometimes?' 'Just me?' said Pooh. 'Yes Pooh.' 'Will you be here too?' said Pooh. 'Yes Pooh, I will be really. I promise I will be, Pooh.' 'That's good,' said Pooh. Said Christopher Robin, 'Pooh, promise you won't forget about me, ever. Not even when I'm a hundred'. Pooh nodded. 'I promise,' he said. Still with his eyes on the world Christopher Robin put out a hand and felt for Pooh's paw. 'Come on' he said. 'Where?' said Pooh. 'Anywhere' said Christopher Robin.

So they went off together. But wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing.

Whenever I read the end of 'The House of Pooh Corner' about 'going away' to groups of children, I'm never sure who is the most upset – for as ever with the best children's literature, a profound point is being made. And as I see it, it is this - that loving another person is all about letting go. As a mere set of words, this is nonsense isn't it? 'Loving means letting go'. Yet I believe that this paradox is central to the Easter message, and is at the heart of our Gospel reading this morning.

Jesus' disciples were feeling a deep sense of loss. They had followed him faithfully for three years or more, giving up their livelihoods and their families to go on the road with him, believing that He was the promised One – the Messiah. They had seen Him teach 1,000s and carry out amazing miracles. It was all so promising and going so well – and then – he began to talk about 'death and going away' increasingly often, and all their hopes and dreams began to be dashed. Their hearts became troubled, and they began to have profound doubts, such that Thomas is moved to ask all those questions that children ask – Where? When? Why? How?

But Jesus was trying to prepare His best friends as well as he could for what was to come – for the disciples would need to learn to let go of the earthly Jesus – in order to recognise and have faith in their risen Lord. Indeed this is a theme that runs throughout the stories of the Easter season, beginning with this one - the night before Jesus died. Jesus' original disciples had to let go of their earlier understanding of the earthly Jesus and to accept that He had to undergo crucifixion in order to fulfil His Father's will and to pave the way for eternal life for His followers. They had to make the connection between suffering and glory, between the cross and creative freedom and power. They must then let go of their previous hopes and expectations of him, and if they truly love him, to learn him afresh, as from the beginning.

In fact most of the stories about the resurrection seem to have been recorded to help the disciples who knew Jesus in the flesh, and others coming after them who were less fortunate – to help them to see that as Christians we are called not simply to preserve the recollections of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth – to see Him as a martyr, a dead friend and no more. Instead, as His disciples, we are the continuing group of those engaged in dialogue with Jesus, having faith and trust that he has gone before us and has won for us the battle over death, such that we are promised eternal life.

But how can the experience of those first disciples help *us* some two thousand years later to grow as Jesus followers? Well firstly I believe – like the disciples we have to learn that we can neither possess other people nor make them conform to the people we want them to be. We have to let others go to discover for themselves and to become the people that ***God intended them to be***, rather than our projection of them.

What's more is that we have to accept change, and to see that as part and parcel of God's plan for us – we cannot stay the same and keep things the same – as much as we'd like to – we have to learn to trust that God in Jesus has prepared the way ahead for us, and that however scary it might seem – we have to reach out into the dark, confident that He will be waiting for us, ready to welcome us. Letting go is admittedly all very risky – it shakes our sense and need of security, and leads us into a foreign land where things seem unsafe and inconsistent. It can also be very painful and involve great loneliness and feelings of loss. BUT the good news is that in the words of the song – we never walk alone - because Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. What did Jesus mean by this?

'I am the way – no one comes to the Father except through me' In the past this phrase has been used to point to the exclusivity of Christianity and to make harsh and unloving claims about other religions, but perhaps it was more of a reflection that only those who follow the lifestyle that Jesus lived and the inner truth that he taught can experience the full nature of life as God intended us to enjoy it.

'I am the truth' – How can a person be the truth? We understand truth in the sense of a set of propositions to be believed in, such as a creed. But Jesus isn't claiming to knowledgeable like some super winner in a cosmic Master Mind competition. It's more a claim to be genuine and authentic for the purpose in hand – which is to represent God to us, in order to make available to us a renewed and restored relationship with him.

'I am the life' – this life means a breaking away from our self-seeking past and a new beginning – with God's self-giving love at its centre. In and through Jesus we are to find access to God – Jesus provides us with the framework for relating both to Him and to one another.

And it is because Jesus is 'the way, the truth, and the life' that we *can* have the courage to let go and to trust in him alone. He will never let us down, and has prepared a place for us. The cross tells us that however bad things seem God in Jesus has suffered it and stood alongside us; the resurrection teaches us that God in Jesus has gone before us to show us the way and to prepare that place for us. The good news of Easter then is that whatever we face, we can let go of the past and move forwards confident that Jesus has us by the hand. Although the way forward might not always seem clear and we might be unsure, and fearful and afraid, passages such as this morning's Gospel reassure us and help us to learn to trust in Jesus' promise that eternal life will be ours.

Indeed it is just as that wonderful passage by Minnie Louise Haskins puts it:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!' So I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night .And he led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.