

Rev Diana Rattray

Farewells

Acts 16: 9-15

John 14:23-29

Year C Easter 6

22 May 2022

TVNZ's Sunday programme last week included the story of Esther Richards who chose to share her decision to leave her earthly life by euthanasia. She is one of the 67 New Zealanders who have exercised their right to choose how to die since the law came into effect. I acknowledge that many of you will have differing views regarding the right to die legislation. What struck me most about what we were shown of Esther's story was the length she went to try and get her goodbye right, both before her death and in how she was farewelled by her family and friends in a gathering after her death.

Starkly contrasting Esther's experience was the death of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. Not only was she shot while wearing her Press body armour,

as mourners tried to carry her casket from the hospital compound they were hit by Israeli Police. Shireen had reported on the Israel/Palestine conflict for over two decades and she was a role model for a generation of young Arab women who saw her on their television screens. As one colleague said – “when a story mattered she was there.”

As I reflected on Esther and Shireens' deaths I could not help but think about the gospel reading for today.

This continuing passage from John's gospel is part of Jesus' farewell discourse. Today is the last Sunday before Ascension Day on Thursday and Pentecost the Sunday after next.

In preparation for leaving his disciples forever Jesus tells of the Spirit, the helper, coming to them after he leaves. The comforter will come and meet the disciples in their place of confusion, fear, in the midst of an uncertain future.

Farewells are important.

If they are done well then those farewelled and those doing the farewelling are able to move on the “next step” of journey, wherever the journey takes them. When farewells are as the result of violence and violence interrupts the farewelling, the result may well be anger, fear and even more violence.

We hear the words from the gospel. Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

And it is right that we pray for peace in the hearts of those mourning from the death of loved ones. That we pray for Peace in our troubled world, in the Middle East, in Ukraine, in all places of conflict.

However peace may not come in a passive way.

One of the things I love about this gospel passage today is that after the talk of the helper, the Spirit who brings peace, Jesus does not end with an invite to stay, and reflect and remain in a cosy, comfortable place. The

passage ends with the words “Get up, let’s go from here”. It calls for movement, action, perhaps even leaving one place and going to another.

There is a similar theme in the reading from the Acts of the Apostle today. Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus by going to where the people were, meeting where they were gathered.

Paul, on the Sabbath, went outside the city wall, by the river, where people were gathered, supposing that there would be a place to pray.

In these times where gathering has not always been easy due to Covid19 protocols and restrictions I see this as a challenge to each of us as to how we move out of our comfortable places, our church spaces. Here at St Matthew in the City the online ministry is significant and the digital platform will make this ministry even stronger.

The gardens and the compost hub are practical signs of the church moving beyond the building as well as addressing the climate crisis.

Likewise the ongoing relationship with Auckland City Mission and Te Tāpui Atawhai, Homeground, learning to be good neighbours. Thinking about and acting on how our lives interact with all who come to this place because of food poverty or loneliness, or a health need or addiction.

In our rapidly changing world, in a world which seems to value spirituality more than religious affiliation, we have no alternative but to keep exploring ways to live out our faith beyond the restrictions of religious buildings and institutions.

Paul did not limit who would hear the teaching of Jesus. During these great 50 days of the season of Easter we continue to explore the characters whose lives are

recorded in the Acts of the apostles. Lydia was a devout woman, a woman of wealth and influence.

Paul, following his visions, was open to connecting and sharing the good news, sharing his story. I see it as a challenge to think about the people who I would be least inclined to want to talk to about my faith, my life, my journey. Perhaps someone who was homophobic or a white right extremist. It is easy to become siloed amongst like-minded people in both our real life and online connections.

All people regardless of societal limitations or our own preconceptions or even prejudices are made in the image of God and loved by God. The key for each one of us is to be open to the Spirit's leading, guiding and to be prepared to move out of our comfortable spaces as we live out and share our faith.

Jesus' farewell discourse tells of his leaving, the Spirit coming and of his return once again. Yet it is not asking

us to live a faith that only looks to future times when the world will be a better place, and peace will prevail. Jesus' good bye is teaching us how to live in the here and now.

We are encouraged both figuratively and literally to rise, and let's go from here. To move from our comfort zones into a place where the world may be hostile or unwelcoming as well as move into being the most effective we can be as people loved by God and made in the image of God.

After the violence at the start of her funeral procession, Shireen was taken by car to the Cathedral of the Annunciation of the Virgin in Jerusalem, where her funeral service was held. I want to finish with an account of what happened after the service when Shireen was carried to her final resting place in Mount Zion cemetery: "A cross of flowers, carried in front of the coffin by Muslim and Christian crowds, also finally got to the graveyard. Then, in an extraordinary moment,

representatives from the Christian denominations in Jerusalem rang church bells in tandem for the first time in the ancient city's history. They rang for more than 30 minutes, mingling with the Islamic religious chant of "God is Great"."[1]

Rest in peace Shireen. Rest in Peace Esther.

May the light of the risen One surround you and all who loved you.

Amen.

[1] <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-palestine-shireen-abu-akleh-violence-peace-laid-to-rest-jerusalem>