

Do not let your hearts be troubled Sermon, Sunday 18 September 2011

I read in 'Daily Light' the scripture "Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law." Psalm 119:18. I prayed, "Lord, open my eyes." I believe the Spirit led me to John 14.

I had only read the first few words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me," when I became aware of the extraordinary context of Jesus' words. I was amazed.

When the scriptures were divided up by a man into the Bible chapters and verses, in order to make it easier to refer to specific sections, some of the divisions now seem pretty arbitrary. At times the divisions get in the way of being able to read the continuity of the texts. That has certainly happened here. Take out the chapter division between the end of John 13 and the beginning of John 14. Take out the heading 'Jesus comforts the disciples' [It is not part of the Bible text]. Then read the scriptures straight through from John 13:36 to John 14:1. Look at this dialogue:

Simon Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows you will disown me three times! Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." (NIV)

How amazing is that? Jesus had just said that Peter would disown him, yet he went straight on to say, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." There is no evidence that Jesus had turned away from Peter to speak solely to the other ten disciples: he was speaking to The Eleven, including Peter. They were still together in the Upper Room, probably still sitting at the table. Jesus had waited until Judas the betrayer had left them and now he seized his last opportunity to speak with his closest followers and friends.

Peter had an over-inflated idea of his own ability to follow Jesus, but Jesus knew him through and through. He knew Peter's weaknesses and he knew that Peter would disown him, just as God had known that Abraham would disown his own wife, Sarah. Both Peter and Abraham saved their own skins in the face of the fear of death. In both cases, God took the longer view. Despite the setbacks, God had a plan, a plan that would still involve Peter, just as it had still involved Abraham; a plan that even went beyond the Cross, beyond the Resurrection, to Jesus coming again for his Bride. And so, he could say to Peter and the other ten, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."

Peter's imminent fall was important. It was not a trivial error. It was sin. But compared to the Eternal Plan that Jesus was describing to The Eleven, it was only a blip and God was more than able to deal with it. Peter must have been devastated with Jesus' prophecy in front of the other disciples (what a public humiliation) but there is no report that he tried to argue about it with Jesus. Somewhere deep down in Peter's

soul, Jesus' next words must have sown a small seed of hope, a balm to take the worst of the terrible sting out of his prophetic words. Do not let your hearts be troubled...

Jesus started by telling The Eleven that he was going where they could not yet follow but he was going to the Father to prepare a place for them. Not only Peter but also Thomas and Philip interrupted Jesus' flow when time was desperately short. The matter of Peter's denial was too 'small' to linger over and Jesus came straight back to his intended theme: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Why? Because whatever troubles, whatever failures, whatever opposition may happen, Jesus was about to go back to his Father and prepare a place for them (and us who believe) in Heaven. It was all planned.

The divisions in the chapters make it look as though Jesus' rebuke of Peter is a separate incident from the rest of his talk. It is not. It is all the same session. Peter was the one who foolishly spoke out and exposed his own shortcomings, but Jesus knew the others inside out too. Maybe the other disciples thought, "Oh, help! If Peter's going to fall away, what chance have the rest of us got?" Whatever was going on in their minds, whatever each disciple was really like, Jesus reassured all of them that ultimately these were not the real issues. The real issue was, and is, what God had planned and his ability to bring it to fulfilment. Jesus' words were an assurance that God's plan would be fulfilled, that what was about to happen, the betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion, was not a mistake, they were all in the plan. And The Eleven would all be part of it and they would all come through, even Peter. How? By Jesus sending his Holy Spirit. So Jesus said to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."

And in the same way, he is giving us the same assurance today. Despite our own shortcomings, sins, failures, setbacks, he is taking the longer view with us too. He will bring us through if we trust in him. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Jesus."