



You will do Greater Things
Rev Canon Dr Eleanor Sanderson
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Acts 7:55-end
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Today's scriptures are very special. They are deeply significant for our journey at this point in time as the people of God in this place. How can we not hear the words of the Epistle and hear God saying to us that we are being built into the living stones of God's temple? We always know that this is true when we hear those familiar words...but...in our current position, those words resonate with a greater depth than usual. And we have to name that truth. We have to name that reality. We have to name that in this Easter season we stand in a time when Jesus said that if the physical temple of his day was to fall down, he would raise it up again in three days. And we learn through our scriptures of the clear understanding that the early disciples had that when he said this, he was talking about his body. That we are the body of Christ. We are built together as living stones on the foundation corner stone of Christ.

It was because of the threat to the temple that those who accused Jesus found their ammunition. And there is a parallel in the story of Stephen, the first martyr, whose death we hear about today. When we read the parts of Acts prior to the lectionary reading today, we find that it is similar accusations that are ultimately the ones levelled at Stephen. He is said to be a threat to the temple and the customs of the temple. The very thing, infrastructure, or medium, that in a certain point in history enables a people to be God's people, becomes the blockage so that at a different point in history they violently miss that same

invitation. That knowledge must always keep us humble, because it is a repeated pattern for humans in their relationship with God¹.

So, let us keep humble. But there is irony here in speaking about humility, when we look at the outrageously amazing things that Jesus and our scriptures today say to us. We are the new creation, the new temple through which people meet the Living God! That is who we are! We are the temple, the sacred place where God is all his glory and wonder chooses to make a home. What else do we hear today? We hear that we are a royal priesthood, a kingdom of priests! All of us. We are a common priesthood, all people through which God mediates, makes known, communicates his presence. We are a royal household; we are sons and daughters of the King of heaven and earth! This is our God given identity: but do we wake up in the morning and look at ourselves in the mirror with this self-perception? Is our self-talk filled with this understanding?

Don reminded us so powerfully last week to trust in God, to wait on God and to believe in God. In times of difficulty, in particular, these are the very times we must run into and not away from God. We can trust and believe in God. Those are the opening words of Christ in today's Gospel reading. As part of that call, we must also hear the invitation to live into our identity in Christ. We must grow, mature, develop, let God build us into a people of confident identity. A people who are not characterised by fear, but characterised by a love that they have been so deeply soaked in that when people are with us, they can honestly say, I have been in the presence of God. Because that is the truth. And that is how we are to relate to each other, with the reverence of acknowledging that we are in the presence of God.

It is audacious eh!

But what is more audacious is that Jesus, himself, says that we will do even greater things than he did when he walked the earth. How is that possible? Well, there is a uniquely redemptive juncture in the person of Christ, but that redemptive posture is subsequently given to us to share and emanate and follow. We see this at work in Stephen, in the way that he follows in Christ's

¹ Someone once commented to me that when you look through history you can see a pattern in which the people who were prominent in the previous movements of God are the ones who persecute the new movements of God.

footsteps. Stephen speaks with a wisdom, understanding and authority in the temple, that is very similar to what we saw in Jesus. Stephen sees into the vision and truth of heaven, in ways that were similar to things that we are told in the Gospel that Jesus saw. And Stephen mirrors so many parts of the death of Jesus: he surrenders his spirit to God and he prays forgiveness for those who kill him. We receive this story of Stephen from scripture, but I could tell you of many, many similar stories of forgiveness, power and grace from many children of God from the subsequent 2000+ years since the death of Christ. Our parish takes its name from one such example of Holy Spirit filled martyr, St Alban.

You will do even greater things than me.

We are all called to greatness in God's kingdom. True power and true greatness take place often in situations of great powerlessness. The story of St Alban is one of powerlessness and yet it is a story and testimony of the power and greatness of God's people. In times of our weakness and suffering, we can reveal the power and presence of God more fully than when we ourselves are content to live and breathe in our own strength and with our own spirit.

You will do greater things than me.

Those are amazing words for us to hear from the lips of Christ. And just as we see Stephen mirror the words and way of Christ in the way he embraced death, so can, and should we, mirror the words of Christ in relation to the way he lived his life. Jesus says these words to the people that he is discipling. These words have shaped so much of the thinking for those of us who have grasped the challenge of contemporary discipleship with both hands. It is a great challenge to level at the leaders of our churches and the cultures, and sometimes cult, which can surround Christian leadership. Are we trying to create a cult in which people celebrate our giftedness, or are we empowering people to do better than us, letting people be close enough to see our weaknesses as well as benefit from our respective strengths and intentionally investing in them in such a way that they will do the greater things. We must be expecting the people that we disciple to surpass us in the Kingdom reality into which they live, this is the model of Christ. We are not to be people whose lives are to be primarily satisfied with how well we embody God to others, but we are a people who

should be looking to invest in others so that they will do greater things that we do. This is at the heart of our discipleship tool kit.

Having this attitude of our measure of success being the success of those whose lives we invest in, is a paradigm shift for many of us in our way of doing church. Our measure of success changes from how great we are at something, to how many other people we have equipped and supported. Our focus of energy is not on becoming amazing at something, but in pouring our energy into helping other people be amazing at those things. Yes, we enjoy and celebrate our own strengths and talents and joys, but we also invest in other people to develop too. And our pride is not in ourselves, but in those we have poured our lives out for. Paul in his epistles' often emanates this attitude, 'you are our pride and joy', 'I boast in you', 'I am being poured out like an offering for you'. In his letter to the Philippians we see Paul say again and again, rejoice in the Lord and so often the foundation of this joy is the people of God, you are my joy, that is part of the gift of his rejoicing in the Lord. When we share together in the greatness, the goodness, the audacious reality of who we all are in Christ, we are full of joy.

It is through this commitment to empowering the greatness of each other, that we return to humility. I want to read to you Philippians 2:1-18, to help us see this connection most clearly.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

⁹*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

¹²*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my
presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear
and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to
work for his good pleasure.*

¹⁴*Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and
innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse
generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to
the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor
in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the
offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— ¹⁸and in the same way
you also must be glad and rejoice with me.*

Pour yourselves out for each other, be slaves to one another, build each other up, encourage one another and in so doing you will co-build with the Holy Spirit the most beautiful temple of God that it is possible on earth to build! No stones or bricks or mortar can match the beauty of God's new creativity in the living stones of Christ's body, Christ's church, you are God's people... to whom Christ says "and you will do even greater things".

Finally, hear Jesus invite us to ask him for great things. Be audacious in your asking and be audacious in your self-giving.