

A Reflection on John 14:1-6

This text is frequently read at funerals, and for good reason. It contains promises that are profoundly comforting in the face of the death of a loved one. However these verses are not only about life after death, but have everything to do with our lives here and now.

The setting is Jesus' farewell address at his last supper with his disciples. Jesus has washed his disciples' feet and has explained to them what this means. He has foretold his betrayal by Judas, and Judas has slipped out into the night. He has told his disciples that he will be with them only a little while longer, and that where he is going, they cannot come. He has also foretold Peter's imminent denial.

No wonder the disciples are troubled. Their beloved teacher is leaving them, one of their own has turned against them, and the stalwart leader among the disciples is said to be on the cusp of a great failure of loyalty. It is as though the ground is shifting beneath their feet.

Jesus responds to the anxiety of his disciples by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me". Jesus calls them back to this fundamental relationship of trust and assures them that he is not abandoning them. Rather, he is returning to his Father, which is good news for them. In speaking of his return to the Father, Jesus assures his disciples that this is also their destination. He tells them that they will be with him and dwell with him in his intimate relationship with the Father.

He tells them of His Father's dwelling place. A home with many mansions, or rooms, to dwell. It was customary in those days, that when traveling on a journey, one would go ahead of the others to secure a lodging place for those following. The purpose of the Lord going away was to secure a resting place for all those who follow Him. He did that by going to the cross and giving Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

When asked by a journalist 'How many ways are there to heaven?' Pope Benedict XVI responded: 'As many as there are people.'

There may indeed be many ways to get to heaven, as many as there are people. There are many ways to live life as well, but not all lead to happiness. Some actually lead to despair, anger and resentment. Some lead to a dead end.

Someone who calls himself simply Father Alfonse wrote this response:

If you want to climb to the top of Mount Everest, then it would a good idea to take a guide along with you; that is, someone who knows the way. Christ knows the way. *I AM the Way.*

If you wish to live your life with more than just niceness and kindness, then it would be a good idea to model your life after someone who lived their life authentically. Christ is the Truth.

I AM the Truth.

If you wish to live your life to the fullest - not necessarily the longest - but a life full of love, unconditional love, then follow Jesus. *I AM the Life.*

Do you know the way? There are many roads to heaven, some harder than others. But there is only one sure guide: the one who has been there before: Jesus Christ. Allow Him to be your guide.

In these troubled times, hear the comforting words from Jesus, spoken directly to you: *Don't let your heart be distressed. Keep on believing in God, and keep on believing in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going."*

SALLY

It was not a large building - the church of St Peter and St Paul. One of those lovely old wooden buildings - high ceilings, stained glass windows and lots of character. In the country but not too far out. A very picturesque setting for weddings; which is the reason I was there now - to play the organ for a wedding on a pleasant spring Saturday afternoon.

As I drove up I was surprised to see a girl of about ten or twelve walking back and forth on the low front fence. I smiled and said "Hi".

The girl smiled back, not missing a step, and said, "Hi yourself. My name's Sally, what's yours?"

"Joy," I replied, shuffling my books as I searched my pockets for the church key.

Sally leapt off the fence and opened the gate for me with a flourish. "Thank you," I said.

Sally followed me up the path to the front door of the church. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to play the organ for a wedding. I like to have a practice and make sure everything's okay in the church before people start arriving."

"Do you play special music?" Sally asked.

"Oh yes. Weddings are very special occasions," I explained.

Sally went on talking and asking all sorts of questions as I continued getting things ready. She sat in the front pew swinging her legs. "We live on the farm cottage just down the road."

"That's nice," I said. I looked at my watch. People would begin to arrive soon. The trouble with churches like this that are shut up most of the time is that they accumulate more than their fair share of dust and cobwebs. I began sweeping.

Sally come over. "I can do that. You go and play the organ."

I was only too happy to pass the broom over. I played and Sally swept. She did a great job too. After the wedding I looked

around but she was nowhere to be seen. One of life's little encounters I thought as I locked up and closed the gate.

I must confess I thought no more about her. Then a couple of weeks later I was back at the church for our monthly Sunday service. I play the organ and set up for that too. As I drove up I noticed Sally sitting on the front steps of the church. She rushed to open the gate as I approached.

"What's happening today? Another wedding?"

"No," I smiled. "No wedding today. We're having church."

"Church?"

"Yes church. Once a month we have a service here. I get things ready and play the music."

"You play music and people listen?"

"Well, yes, kind of. Usually I play so people can sing."

"People sing? In church? On Sunday?"

"That's right. We sing songs called hymns - songs about God, and about life and God's love for us in Jesus. We also have prayers and read from the Bible."

And people come ... on a Sunday?"

"Yes they do Sally."

"Why?"

"Because it's good. Because it helps us. Because we like to get together as God's people. Because we can learn and be encouraged ... and I love playing the organ and helping people sing praises to God."

Sally shook her head as if she did not quite see the point. When people started to come in she went and sat quietly at the back of the church. The older ladies smiled at her. One or two even spoke to her after the service.

I introduced Sally to our minister. He seemed very surprised as well as extremely pleased to meet her. Shaking her hand firmly he said how he was sorry there were no other young people at church.

When the minister was gone Sally told me why she thought there were no young people. "They don't know they're welcome.

And then the music and stuff - puts you off a bit. The best way would be to just make friends with them - let them know they're really welcome and have a place."

"May be you're right. I'll pass that on."

Sally lingered by the organ; occasionally fiddling with a stop or fingering the keys. "Do you play?" I asked.

"No."

"Would you like to?"

Sally's eyes lit up. Then she put her head down. "Mum says we can't afford lessons. Anyway we don't even have a keyboard."

"I've got some time. You sit down and I'll show you a few things to begin with." We managed to get a sort of tune out of the protesting organ. All I could think about on the way home was Sally's grin: literally ear to ear!

Next month Sally was waiting on the church steps again. She sat through the service - two of the older ladies invited her to sit with them. They helped her with the service book, and I noticed with a smile that this time she was singing. Afterwards she sat down at the organ. Sally had a great time, though I did suggest as tactfully as I could, that it might be a while before she relieved me as organist. Sally wanted to know what else she might be able to do at church now. So I suggested handing out the books and saying hello to the people as they came in.

I drove Sally home that Sunday, and went in to meet her mother. Sally's mother seemed very pleased to learn of the altogether wholesome activities her daughter was involved in. I gathered that Sally could be a bit of a law unto herself. As I was leaving I mentioned the Community Carol Service being held at St Peter and St Paul. - an early evening gathering followed by supper on the church lawn. "Sally will be giving out the books," I told her mother. "You might like to come along too."

On the evening of the carol service Sally turned up a whole hour early! She wore a freshly ironed blouse and pleated skirt, and her hair was all done up. She proudly gave out books and escorted people to a seat. I noticed Sally's mother come in - she looked proud and pleased. The funny thing was, I did too.

After that Sally was invited to take on giving out the books as her regular job for the church services.

As you might have guessed I was getting to know Sally quite well. I was thoroughly enjoying it - especially as my children had all left home. Sometimes I took Sally to youth group at our main church. But what she enjoyed most was to sit on the front steps and talk after church.

One day as we were sitting on the front steps after church, Sally asked me to sign something. It was an application for boarding school. "Do you want to go?" I asked.

Sally stared off into the distance. "Mum thinks it would be best. It's a great opportunity - good school, good education - and all on scholarship. Mum says she'd miss me, but she thinks it would be good for me. I think she's worried I might go off the rails ..."

"Might you?" I said.

Sally did not answer.

We sat in silence for a while. "I'm happy to sign Sally, if that's what you want."

So Sally went off to boarding school that February. Over the next couple of years we saw her occasionally at holiday time. Everybody missed her and was pleased to see her. We used to talk about how things were going. I think it was much tougher than she let on.

Then after that we did not see Sally at all. Later I heard that Sally and her Mum had moved away. I remember thinking "Oh well, I hope everything's all right." Of course I kept praying for Sally. We never did hear any more - except rumours - and it is no good listening to rumours.

Which is why it was a real surprise to get this letter the other day - right out of the blue. Sally must have worked hard to track me down. I have moved a couple of times since I used to play the organ at St Peter and St Paul.

Anyway, it seems Sally is graduating from university - with honours too. It's a big occasion and she is only allowed two seats. Her Mum will have one of course; and she wants me to have the other one. Sally is really keen for me to come. She wants to be a teacher - just like me.

The funny thing is, in all our conversations Sally never asked me what my job was, and I never told her. I was an orchard worker, just an orchard worker - picking, packing, pruning, thinning. Fancy me being a teacher!

Of course I will have to go for Sally. I don't know who will clap louder. Me or her Mum!