

Reading: John 14:1-14

Peter is a great friend. When he tramped the Abel Tasman with us he would catch the water taxi and go ahead because he had shin splints. This way he would arrive before us at each hut and he would put on the fire, boil the billy, find the best beds and grab the best pillows. He made friends with everyone, even the Australians. By the time we arrived he greeted us with steaming hot drinks, a warm hut and new friends to play 500 with. One hut even had a shower that was set out in the bush to keep one's modesty. Peter got me to the head of the queue to have the first shower. I thought this was jolly Christian of him but later I learned that it had been mutually agreed by all concerned (those who had shared a bunk room with Nick for three days) that it would be great if he had a shower.

Often read at funerals, our Gospel today has Jesus going ahead of us to prepare a place for us. I like to think of my friend getting the hut ready. Jesus is the one who goes before us into the next life and prepares a dwelling place for us. Jesus has just finished explaining to the disciples that he must leave them. He sees all their worried faces so he offers them these words of hope: "Let not your hearts be troubled, ... I go and prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also." The much loved image of many rooms (or mansions) in my father's house means abiding places or stopping off places on the way to God. We might think of them as travel lodges or DOC huts.

This is an Easter season reading because Jesus is our pioneer through the way of death.

This is a great comfort but you don't have to die to have the experience of Jesus going ahead of you. For those with eyes to see it, Jesus going ahead can be a daily experience.

One of my first jobs was as a student chaplain at Victoria University in Wellington. I lived in a little flat at the university with two flatmates and a three legged cat. It was my job to reach out to students and pastorally care for them. That sounds really good but how do you actually do it? The oversight committee said a good way to do that would be to go to the cafe and loiter with intent. I thought you could get arrested for that but I summoned up all the courage I could find and set off. I sat down with my milkshake and crab stick it wasn't long until another student sat opposite me. Eventually I even managed to even talk to him. It turned out that he was there doing exactly what I was. We became good friends and after that would go and loiter intently with each other. God had gone ahead of me and prepared a friend for me.

After many weeks in lock down one of things that people are sharing with me is anxiety about coming out of lock down. Some can't face work, some can't face the traffic. But Jesus is saying to us today, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I'm going ahead of you, there is nowhere you can go that I am not present." Even in the most extreme of circumstances God is already there. Let me give you another example.

For eight decades of the twentieth century Christians were persecuted in Russia. Dmitri lived with his family in a small village four hours from Moscow. The nearest church was a three day walk away making it possible to get to church only twice a year.

So Dmitri started a home church with his family. It started small enough but a few neighbours got wind of it and soon the group grew to twenty five people. The officials took notice and demanded he stop, but he didn't. Dmitri was sacked from his factory job and his wife from her teaching job and his sons expelled from school but still he continued.

When the group got to 75 there wasn't enough room in the house. The villagers squeezed into every corner. They even looked through the windows. One night a group of soldiers burst into the gathering and grabbed Dmitri, "You must stop!" they said and slapped him across the face.

He didn't stop. The next week 150 people came. Dmitri was arrested and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

His jail cell was so small he could take just one step to the wall. And he was the only Christian among 1500 others. They tortured him and the other prisoners mocked him but he would stand arms outstretched singing hymns.

They kept telling him to recant his faith and on one occasion he almost did. The guards convinced him that his wife had been murdered and his children had been put into state care.

The thought of it was too much to bear. The guards told him the next day they would return with a form for him to sign to give up his faith.

That night over 1000 kilometres away his family prayed for him. In a dream Dmitri saw them gathered around praying for him. He felt they were safe.

The next morning came when the guards asked for his signature he said simply "I'm not signing anything."

The guards had had enough they dragged him to the place of execution. As they did 1500 criminals all raised their hands and began to sing the hymn Dmitri had sung each morning. "Who are you?" they asked him in desperation. "I am," he said, "a child of the living God." They could break neither his spirit nor his faith, so they simply let him go.

As we begin to come out of our lockdown time, Jesus has a message for you. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid. I am going ahead of you to prepare a place for you."