

Sunday, 22 May 2022
Sixth Sunday of Easter
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'The Holy Spirit is our home, and our home is in the Spirit'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Roberta Drury (32)
Margus D Morrison (52)
Andre Mackneil (53)
Aaron Salter Jr (55)
Geraldine Talley (62)
Celestine Chaney (65)
Heyward Patterson (67)
Katherine Massey (72)
Pearl Young (77)
Ruth Whitfield (86)¹

Of the people who were shot and killed last Saturday at a supermarket in Buffalo, a city in the state of New York, six were women. All were black. The youngest victim was 32 and the oldest 86. May their souls rest in peace, and rise in glory.

I arrived in New York City two days after the massacre at Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo and, as you can imagine, it was all over the news. Buffalo, the second largest city in New York state, is close to the Canadian border. 18-year-old Peyton Grendon drove 200 miles from his home, having researched the location of his planned attack. He wanted specifically to kill black people. He ended up shooting “11 Black and two white victims before surrendering to authorities in an assault he broadcast on the streaming platform Twitch.”²

The perpetrator of this attack subscribed to ‘replacement theory’, a belief that nation states are being invaded and overrun by black and brown people, replacing white people for greater political purposes. Ultimately, he felt that his home was under threat. His horrendous attack fitted into *his notion* of home.

Of course, when a tragedy like this happens and so far away from our home, so far from our daily lives and tribulations, it makes us feel even more helpless. St James’s Piccadilly is a long way away from this particular loss of life. We can easily become desensitised to the daily litany of violence and inexplicable horror on our news feeds. There is nothing we can do but watch, and cry, and pray and hope. We may look to God asking ‘why’, and ‘how’. We may stand in our personal and collective grief and seek better. In all of this, we need to also turn to the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is our home, and our home is in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit holds a deeper and broader sense of home.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/16/1099124755/buffalo-shooting-victims-names>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/15/buffalo-shooting-supermarket-new-york-joe-biden>

In today's passage from the Book of Acts, Paul's dream seems to respond to an unsaid request for some guidance. In Acts 16:7-8 just before the text we heard today, we read "When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas" (Acts 16:7-8). It is then that Paul has his vision and begins his voyage towards Macedonia. In reading about the travels of Paul, with the delightful detail of the collective 'we' narrator, we are getting a bit of a tour guide's perspective. As one scholar writes, "Phillipi, as a Roman colony (originally settled by army veterans, partly to pacify a hostile area) operated as a kind of mini-Rome, whose citizenship, magistrates, and laws were Roman".³ Within this space, we find Lydia "a dealer in purple cloth" (Acts 16:14). In her open heartedness, Lydia receives the story and promise of Jesus Christ, is baptised and welcomes the guests into her home.

Lydia's hosting of Paul and his friends mirrors the hosting the Holy Spirit requires of us. If the Holy Spirit is our home, and our home is in the Spirit, what would that look like for us? What would making a home and giving room for the Holy Spirit feel like for us? How would it affect our lives? What would we have to give up? To find a home in us, the Holy Spirit *will need to do stuff, disrupt* and rearrange. For us to find home in the Holy Spirit, we will need the kind of self-interrogation that holds us to account and gives us a renewed vision of the possibilities inherent within us.

In talking about home, we acknowledge that the concept of home is both problematic and deeply enchanting. It is too often highjacked. It is too often idealised when we know that, for many, home is not a safe place. It can sometimes be presented as something that we inherit and not something we can create afresh with friends, the family we chose, in new spaces and places. Home can be a place of deep welcome, though we also recognise that it can be a place of rejection. Home can also move with us so that it grows to encompass our dreams and hopes.

John 14 is wonderful scripture because it makes clear the reality of God's vision of home: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?". The chapter actually begins with the words "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me". Here Jesus is talking about a pluralistic vision of home in which everyone has a place. If the Holy Spirit is seeking a home in us in order that we can find a home in the Holy Spirit, then this must mean that *our difference is precisely what God is looking for*.

God's broad and deep vision is bold and without apology, and confirms that there is room. There is room in God's heart for all of humanity. There is room in God's house, be it on earth or in the world we cannot yet see, for all of God's children, there is room at the table for the full colour and beauty of the people of God, all made in the image of God. The Holy Spirit *can be* our home, and our home *can be* in the Spirit.

The evangelist tells us that "Jesus answered him [Judas], 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. We can of course replace the word 'father' with 'mother' or 'divine creator' or

³ Loveday Alexander, 'Acts' in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.1028 -1061, p. 1049.

‘protector’. And we see that the invitation is still there. The Trinitarian God wants to come and make a home with us. We have already been invited to the party. And God, in true co-creative style, is asking whether there is room for this divine presence in our hearts, so that a new kind of home can be formed and found.

By the end of John 14, Jesus makes it even clearer what he is talking about, for the avoidance of doubt:

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The word translated as advocate, which is also sometimes translated as helper, “*parakletos*” is a verbal adjective, often used of one called to help in a lawcourt. In Jewish tradition the word was transcribed with Hebrew letters and used for angels, prophets, and the just as advocates before God’s court.”⁴ This should give us confidence in the face of the tumult of the world in which we live, that we are not alone. We have been asked to make a home, a home for this companion-in-arms to help us navigate this unjust and unequal world. We have been encouraged to make a home in the Spirit too. We have been told not to be afraid because the Holy Spirit is our home, and our home is in the Spirit.

In his book, *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*, Georges Van den Abeele offers several definitions of the word ‘voyage’. He also presents the Greek word for home ‘oikos’, about which he writes “a home(land) must be posited from which one leaves on the journey and to which one hopes to return - whether one actually makes it back home changes nothing from this perspective”⁵ (Van den Abeele 1992: xviii). If home, therefore, is a place to which one hopes to return, we can see the Holy Spirit as the representative source of possibility and of transformation.

While in New York, my husband and I were walking past the Rockefeller Centre on W 49th Street when we saw clothes hanging above us, as if on a washing line. It was an installation by Mexican artists showing the lives of everyday people juxtaposed against the luxury of Fifth Avenue. The 700 items of donated clothing represented something of home, of what you see when you travel through South and Central America, and indeed in many other parts of the world, of laundry hanging on rooftops to dry. Su Wu, curator of the nomadic *Masa Galeria*, said that the artists were “making something monumental of the very intimate”.⁶ That is what I think that the Holy Spirit is doing when the Spirit becomes our home and our home becomes the Holy Spirit. In the call to an *indwelling*, the Holy Spirit begins to make something rather monumental of this intimate encounter with our lives.

⁴ René Kieffer, ‘John’ in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.960-1000, p.987.

⁵ Georges Van den Abeele, *Travel as Metaphor: from Montaigne to Rousseau*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

⁶ <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/on-air/as-seen-on/masa-galeria-at-rockefeller-center/3679097/>

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

So we read in Genesis 1. We may not feel that God is there in the middle of all that we are going through, in the massacre, and the wars, and the cost of living crisis, and the struggle to make ends meet, in our loneliness, and our sense of being regularly overwhelmed, but God *is there*. God *is here*. God *has to be here* because God's Spirit has been there from the very beginning, and we believe that God will be there at the end.

We have been asked to make room because the Holy Spirit is our home, and our home is in the Spirit. What, I wonder, will our answer be to this loving request?

Amen.