Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (Jn. 14:5)

That’s a question that’s being asked a lot at the moment. From cathedrals and churches, to homes and hospitals, even the virtual Houses of Parliament, we’re all living in the midst of anxiety and uncertainty. Seven weeks since the start of the lockdown and still the cries of doctors and nurses, of schoolteachers and lecturers, of politicians and parents, ‘Nothing could have prepared us for this’ – ‘How can we know the way?’

Most of us have had moments in our lives of feeling lost, of losing our bearings. I still remember the visceral sensation of being lost in a supermarket as a small child, over forty years ago. That sinking feeling of turning around and realising I had let slip my mom’s hand for a moment, lost track of the trolley and suddenly was surrounded by a sea of legs, all gut-wrenchingly unfamiliar. What’s rarer is to have that same sense as a society. I wonder if it was like this 75 years ago after VE day, as the end of the war finally came into sight and new horizons began to reopen. Life forever changed by the experience of the previous six years, was there clear hope and purpose? Or did our parents and grandparents feel the same anxiety, ask the same question, ‘How can we know the way’?

What a way to enter a new role and a new ministry! When we first interviewed Jonathan back in January, coronavirus was only just making itself into most of our vocabulary and he can scarcely have imagined that he would be starting work as our new archdeacon as a remote presence, unable to join us physically, popping up only as a digital head in a virtual window on conference calls.

In times like these we want reassurance, we want a plan, we want a road map. For a new job, a new way of life, an easing of lockdown rules and regulations. Phases, traffic light systems – something, anything to guide us. For, how can we know the way?
Our readings today give us a clue. Jesus, talking to the disciples at the Last Supper, tells them not to let their hearts be troubled but to trust in God and trust in him, for he is the Way. Characteristically, the disciples don’t get it and Jesus has to reframe the message three times – ‘if you know me, you know the Father’, ‘whoever has seen me has seen the Father’, ‘the words I speak to you, I do not speak on my own but the Father who dwells in me does his works’.

We ask for a map but we get a person – Jesus Christ, image of the invisible God, only-begotten Son of the Father. We ask for a strategy and we get a way of being – Christlikeness. It’s confusing. It was not the answer the disciples expected then and it’s probably still not the one we expect now, but it is the answer – the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Stephen, the first deacon, shows us the same thing in action. His encounter with the murderous crowd in Acts is a living out of the same teaching. In his life and his death, he is Christ-like. His words at his stoning precisely mirror those of Luke’s Christ on the Cross – words of forgiveness, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34) and words of entrusting, ‘Into your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk. 23:46). Stephen follows Christ not only in loving his people, not only in preaching the truth but in dying a Christ-like death of forgiveness and trust.

Now we of course hope that Jonathan, for all the diaconal heart of his archdeacon’s ministry, will not suddenly find himself called to Christ Church to die a Christ-like death. But it is Christlikeness, above all, we seek from him. And it’s Christlikeness we seek from one another. His vocation and ours is not to come in and fix everything, not to be a leader, or a manager, much less one of those sinister figures with black gloves and dark authority that we see on sitcoms, like Rev. It is to live in Christ, to reveal something of Christ to others, to be Christ-like.

Over the coming days and weeks our churches, our politicians, our economists will all try to offer strategies and ways forward – anchor-points, real and imagined, to try and combat that gut-wrenching sense of being lost. We will need them. We will follow guidelines, protocols and PR-tested slogans, but they’re not really the Answer with a capital A. For that we can only look to one place and one person. The love of God made known in Jesus Christ. A love that goes all the way. A love that calls us to be the same.