

Sermon for Sunday May 10 Easter 5, 2020

John 14:1-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In 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? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

I wonder what Bible reading you’d like at your funeral.

That got your attention, didn’t it? Perhaps you found it a morbid the question to ask, but there is a connection with today’s reading from John’s gospel. John 14:1-6 is one of the most frequently used readings at funeral services, so I have read it out many, many times over the last 30 years. If you don’t choose a different one, this is likely to be the one you get! However, a funeral is not the place to preach a full sermon on those verses, so I am glad that today we have an opportunity to explore it a little further.

In John, this comes from the early part of what is effectively a long farewell speech by Jesus to his disciples, which starts in chapter 13 and ends with his prayer in chapter 17. It’s the last teaching Jesus can do before he is arrested.

Just before our reading, in chapter 13, Jesus has predicted his betrayal, and also that Peter will deny him. Something that we also often miss is that in that denial conversation, Peter and Jesus have already talked about where he is going, and that theme carries over into chapter 14. Jesus says to that Peter in chapter 13 that he cannot follow him on his forthcoming journey, although he will follow later, whereas in 14, Jesus tells his disciples that where he is, they will be also.

In the earlier conversation, Jesus seems to be talking about being crucified, which will take place very soon – as we know from the rest of John’s Gospel. Tradition tells us that Peter does indeed follow Jesus down this path later, as Jesus appear to foresee (13:36), and that he was crucified upside down.

This passage in chapter 14 is often used to talk about the promise of heaven – and that is an important point you can draw out of it, but that is often where the funeral sermon ends. I want to focus more on trust and security. I think Jesus is wanting to reassure his disciples and give them something to trust in.

A friend of mine used to go caving, and he once said to me that you learn the meaning of trust when you rely on a very long rope to climb on that someone else has secured. Your life literally depends on the skill and reliability of someone else. The most significant thing that these verses say to me are that Jesus enables us to know God and to trust him fully.

Take the famous saying “I am the way, the truth and the life” (v.6). For his fellow Jews, those three words would be very familiar. “Way” is a word that is used in the Old Testament to talk about living harmoniously with God. “This is the way; walk in it” said Isaiah (Isa 30:21). “Teach me your way” prayed the writer of Psalm 27 (Ps. 27:11). Likewise, truth and life come up again and again as having their origin in God himself. By saying what he said, Jesus brings these ideas together and makes it clear that he is bringing the very presence of God into the midst of the disciples in himself.

In verse 7, he continues that seeing him is equivalent to having seen God. Later in verse 9 he says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”. Anyone listening would have believed that seeing God would mean death. Whereas Jesus say he is the way, the truth and the life – seeing him is not the way to death, but life. Again, in the Old Testament, Moses is allowed to see God’s back, but not his face, as God says that no one may see him and live (Ex. 33:20) But here, the disciples look into the face of Jesus, and he says that in him they have found life – and life in all its fulness.

Jesus is clear that knowing him is to know the Father. And further on beyond where we read he says “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (v.10) and talks about the Spirit. Later on Christians would draw on sayings such as that to build a picture of what we call the Trinity.

So, to know Jesus is to know the Father – to know God himself, and Jesus says they will make their home with all who love and follow him (v.23). In the original language, it’s the same word translated dwelling place in verse 2 of our reading. There will be a place to live, but also God will be dwelling with us. It’s about a sense of connection between us and God, which is not just a dwelling place when we die, but us living in relationship now that continues into that dwelling place to come. That’s about security.

People wonder whether we can know God. Some people – even clergy – are finding not being in church difficult, and some even feel disconnected from God as a result. But it’s not true – God is just as present in my study or your living room at home as he is in church. He is accessible to us wherever we are, precisely because of who Jesus is. Jesus is saying that to his followers – he is saying that God is there, they can trust him in whatever follows, and in whatever comes next that cannot be taken away from them. Neither can it be taken away from us, because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that is where our true security lies, not just one, but now. Amen.

Two prayers from the Church of England for these troubled times.

Lord Jesus Christ,
you taught us to love our neighbour,
and to care for those in need
as if we were caring for you.
In this time of anxiety, give us strength
to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,
and to assure the isolated
of our love, and your love,
for your name’s sake.

Amen.

God of compassion,
be close to those who are ill,
afraid or in isolation.
In their loneliness, be their consolation;
in their anxiety, be their hope;
in their darkness, be their light;
through him who suffered alone on the cross,
but reigns with you in glory,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

