

SERMON EASTER 5 - JOHN 14:1-14 *Canon Jeff Richardson*

To say that this passage from John is packed with divine love would be an understatement. In chapter 13 the prelude to our Gospel reading Jesus fills the air with the fragrance of his love, within the midst of uncertainty, confusion and fear as the disciples come to realise that Jesus will leave them to suffer at the hands of those who would kill him.

Our passage opens with Jesus (whose own heart is troubled) attempting to reassure his disciples. After he had washed their feet and eaten with the twelve, Jesus foretold his betrayal by Judas (13:26-28) and his betrayal by the loyal Peter (13:37-38). He has commanded his disciples to love each other (13:34) even as he predicts his own departure. No wonder the Twelve are upset and confused. Who is to be trusted? What does Jesus mean that he is going somewhere that they cannot come (verse 33)?

Jesus' farewell words to his disciples in this discourse anticipate and assume the events that lie ahead: the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. Each one of these realities is the result of the primary event in the Gospel of John, the incarnation. The disciples are going to be faced with the end of the incarnation, the end of Jesus' presence on earth as God. Jesus needs them to know that there is more beyond the crucifixion which, for John, is the inevitable outcome of being human. That which becomes human must die.

At the same time, the resurrection and then the ascension are the next realities in store, for Jesus and for his believers. Note that even the resurrection is not the end. The resurrection presumes that there is something even beyond itself, the ascension. The beginning of chapter 14, describes not resurrected life but ascended life with God. Just as Jesus will ascend to the Father, so also will Jesus' believers, where he goes to prepare an abiding place for them. It is from this perspective that we need to hear and interpret these introductory claims of the Farewell Discourse.

Indeed, where most of us hear these opening verses of chapter 14 is at funerals or memorial services. The image of a great house or mansion in the sky for the recently departed is evidently Jesus' main purpose, or building project, if you will, to prepare to receive the loved one who has passed away.

This could actually be a very accurate depiction of this text if we remember that "dwelling place" is no "place" at all unless it means being in the intimate presence of God, or better yet, being at the bosom of the Father. Ascended life, toward which resurrection looks, means with God, with Jesus, sharing in their intimate bond and all that that intimacy entails. Where Jesus is, there we will be (14:3).

Like many or most of the characters in John's Gospel, Thomas hears Jesus' promise of place literally. "Where are you going, Jesus? We need a map, a diagram, something like that to get us to the right location." Into this misunderstanding Jesus offers one of the more well-known "I AM" statements in John's Gospel, "I am the way, the truth and the life." The "I AM" statements in the John's Gospel make known Jesus as the source of life, abundant in grace, and, seen in connection with the absolute "I AM" associated with God of the Old Testament.

Yet, removed from the conversation between Jesus and Thomas, and from the situation of Jesus' final hours with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, the "I AM" statement has turned into evidence for and proof of Jesus as the sole means of salvation, no matter how salvation seems to be defined.

If we keep reading beyond verse 6, we realize that the Father has already come, is already present, in the life and ministry of Jesus. “If you know me” is a condition of fact, “if you know me, and you do.” These are words of comfort, not condition, for the disciples. There is nothing uncertain for their present or their future because of their relationship with Jesus. Of that, Jesus wants them to be secure. The misunderstanding continues with Philip’s request to see the Father.

In my many years of ministry the one question I am most often asked “How do I know God”, many come to believe when they know Christ through Scripture, worship and experience. With the disciples they had the experience of Jesus firsthand, they saw his mighty deeds, heard his teachings, reclined with him in prayer. When they walked with Jesus, they walked with God, when they spoke to Jesus, they spoke to God, when they loved Jesus, they loved God. The disciples knew God in Jesus, but these final hours with Jesus, may have left them thinking otherwise. It can be the case with us also, that after many years of faith in God, when suddenly faced with incredible anguish and suffering, we find a spiritual emptiness, and thus making us feel as if God is missing in our lives. But God is not missing, just waiting to be found. And Jesus is the way. And Jesus is the signpost back to God.

The adage “seeing is believing” may be applicable to Philip’s conversation with Jesus. There is little doubt that seeing the works of Jesus, are indeed enough for the Father to be revealed not only to Philip but to the other disciples. Like Thomas Jesus emphasised that seeing will mean knowing the Father. Perhaps Philip was seeking a Theophany, an appearance of God as in the Old Testament and particularly in the story of Moses. Even if this is the case Jesus makes it clear that his relationship with the Father is one, and to know this Philip is required to believe, and such belief comes from seeing and faith together and here faith includes an intellectual analysis of what you see and know, especially in relation to Jesus.

Jesus promises Thomas and Philip and therefore all the disciples that they will indeed do greater works than Jesus. This may have seemed impossible at the time as their leader was facing death. Yet this passage from John is about events post ascension. The works they will do, empowered by the Spirit at Pentecost, will see the church grow by the thousands, with miraculous signs, and the spread of the Gospel throughout the world.

Whatever the disciples ask in his name Christ will do. This is prayer. Jesus now concludes with a discourse about the subject of prayer. “Whatever you ask” “Anything you ask” is the basis of prayer. Yet it must be centred in the person of Jesus Christ. It is prayer proceeding from faith in Christ, prayer that gives expression to a unity with all that Christ stands for, prayer which seeks to set forward Christ himself. And the purpose of it all is to the glory of God, even though we are told “that this glory is in the son.” The Father and Son are intimately related and inseparable and because of this relationship Christ himself will answer prayer, even though addressed to father. With prayer in Christ there can be no limit to the power of prayer, which becomes manifest at the Day of Pentecost.

This passage from John’s Gospel connects us to our Loving God who gives to each of us the way that leads to life. In difficult times (including the Covid 19 pandemic), where we feel uncertainty, confusion and fear, God through Jesus’ own troubled heart stands with us, and reveals that heavenly dwelling place not made of bricks and mortar, but the instead full embrace of God’s love. Through faith we know and see Jesus as the way to eternal life and everything about him is true. And what binds all this together is prayer, inspired and governed by the Holy Spirit who will bring whatever we ask before God in Jesus to fruition and above all to keep us in the way, the truth and the life.