

Sermon for 3rd May 2026, Year A, Easter 5

Preached at St John's Baillieston

John 14:1-14

Sermon

We've just heard some of the words that Jesus speaks during the Last Supper in Jerusalem, before he is arrested. He has been telling his disciples that he is going on ahead of them, and that they will not be able to follow. He knows what is coming, that he will be arrested and soon sent to die, but they do not understand. 'Why can we not follow?' they plead, like children wondering why they can't follow their dad to the office for the day. 'You will follow me later,' Jesus responds, which would be very ominous if they knew what he meant, and he instructs them to love one another in the meantime. 'By this everyone will know you are my disciples,' he says.

And then he continues with this passage that we've just heard. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." An astonishing request by someone who knows they don't have long to live. "Believe in God and believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places, and I go to prepare a place for you, and I will return to take you with me."

This emphasis on the many dwelling places in the Father's house is perhaps why this reading is so often read as a comfort at funerals – especially, it should be admitted, when the deceased was 'not well known for their great love,' shall we say, and their family perhaps needed the reassurance that heaven is far more inclusive and welcoming than they may have feared.

One of the consequences of believing in the Trinity is that we have a God who is expressing himself as a dynamic community of love – the so-called 'perichoretic dance' of mutual indwelling – whose primary characteristic is that

they long to include and enfold all others in that same love. This isn't something that can be enforced on us, but which we are invited to freely choose.

And so, Jesus spends an enormous amount of his life trying to help people understand what heaven is like. It's hard to explain so he uses a lot of metaphors and parables. 'It's like something that starts with a tiny seed but spreads over the whole earth. It's like the yeast in bread that makes the whole loaf rise. It's the pearl of great price that people are willing to give up everything else for. It doesn't have the same rules as this world; it's not ruled by wealth and power and status, but by love and joy, forgiveness and reconciliation; wounded relationships are restored.'

Jesus clearly didn't want his followers to wait for heaven; he also wanted us to long for these things in the here and now - to unite heaven with earth. Simply yearning for heaven changes our hearts even now, and begins the transformation that will be completed when we meet God face to face. Many of you will have experienced this transformation - you're no longer the same person you were when you first encountered God.

The twelve disciples, of course, still did not understand what Jesus was saying. They saw Jesus as a divinely ordained and spiritually powerful Messiah, who had arrived in God's holy city – Jerusalem – where he would surely soon be crowned king and lead the people to overthrow the oppression of Rome and reestablish a righteous kingdom of God, where the disciples would sit on thrones and judge the people. So, when Jesus says, "You know the way to the place where I am going," it is absolutely no surprise that Thomas exclaims that not only do they not know the way, but they have no clue where Jesus is going either.

They are fundamentally talking at cross purposes. If the disciples had understood that Jesus was talking about dying and returning to the Father, then perhaps they might have understood the way to follow him, which is the way of love, compassion and selfless sacrifice. But they still want to know what the big plan

is for overthrowing the Romans. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Tell us the plan for our glorious victory!

Then Jesus utters those words which have come to exemplify the heart of his self-identity. “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

Later, the earliest Christians would come to describe their faith as ‘The Way,’ with this ‘way’ not referring to a set of beliefs or religious practices, but a living relationship with ‘The Way’ himself – Jesus Christ.

Inevitably, Jesus describing himself as the only ‘way’ to God has become the cause of many exclusive claims about Christian faith. ‘You have to believe in Jesus, and only Jesus, in order to get to heaven,’ many preachers have declared, implicitly sending all followers of other religions to hell. But that interpretation makes little sense to me, especially since so many human beings have lived their lives without ever hearing of Jesus Christ. They may even have lived centuries or even millennia before him. They may have lived in far-flung places of the world that had never even heard of the Romans, let alone Jerusalem and Galilee. How can encountering God depend so entirely on expressing belief in a person they never had the chance to meet?

Instead, I think Jesus was pointing out that he and the Father are so utterly united in spirit and purpose that coming to Jesus and coming to the Father are essentially the same thing. You can’t meet God without meeting Jesus – not because other faiths lead to hell, but because any encounter with God is by definition also an encounter with Jesus, and vice versa. And God is everywhere, the source of our being, the breath that gives us life.

Philip doesn’t get it, of course, and he asks Jesus to show them the Father, to which Jesus responds by reinforcing his same point, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the

Father who dwells in me does his works.” It’s just not possible to separate Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally, I want to return to the beginning of the passage, because even though the conversation quickly becomes distracted by questions of Jesus’s identity and plans for the future, Jesus initially starts by simply wanting to comfort his disciples whom he knows are about to suffer bereavement. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. I will come again and take you to myself.”

Even though all life must eventually come to an end, sometimes very much sooner than we would wish, Jesus insists that we are never abandoned. He reassures us that God’s house is inclusive, welcoming, full of dwelling places for all different kinds of people. This is not somewhere we must fight our way into or prove ourselves worthy of. It is not ruled by scales of justice balancing our good against our bad with an arbitrary pass-mark of perfection; it is rather a place of unconditional welcome, with a party going on, and Jesus himself coming with outstretched hand, like the father of the Prodigal Son, to draw us in, each one of us a beloved guest of honour, transformed by the One who made us, loved us, and saved us.