

John 14: 1-14 (first reading Acts 7:55-end)

Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life

The anxiety levels of the Twelve are through the roof. They have clean feet (John 13) and have learned a lesson about the extent to which Jesus will humble himself in order to serve those he loves, but they have heavy hearts. They have been warned that one of their number will betray Jesus, and that glorification will involve separation. Jesus is leaving them. Moreover, they can't yet follow Jesus to the place where he is going. The news both hurt and baffled the disciples. A sense of foreboding has gripped them.

Into this context Jesus speaks the comforting words of John 14, words which had a particular relevance in this context, but have since come to give comfort in many very different situations. They are often the words chosen to be read at Funeral Services to reassure people that there is ample provision for them to enjoy God's continuing love after death. The opening verse is particularly relevant to the situation in which we find ourselves at this very moment: *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.'*

The word 'believe' can also be translated 'trust'. *Trust in God, trust also in me.* The disciples are to establish a relationship of trust in the one who will not let them down, even though he will not be always physically present with them. No wonder the disciples are confused. Jesus reassures the disciples with the promise of a place in heaven. The preparation of 'the place' will come about through the death and Resurrection of Jesus, but no-one seems to understand.

Philip's literal question betrays the disciples' lack of spiritual insight. Philip did not expect 'the way' to be identified with Jesus; the way of suffering and triumph through humiliation – the way personified in Jesus.

The way has nothing to do with a geographical destination. The disciples ought to have known 'the way'. If the disciples know Jesus, they know the way to the Father. It is worth noting that Jesus does not say: 'No-one comes to God except through me,' but 'No-one comes to the 'Father' except through me.

The word 'Father' was the word Jesus used when he addressed God, and he also commended it to his followers. This is the unique contribution Jesus has made to our understanding of God. When he says: '*Whoever has seen me had seen the Father*', (v.9), he is saying that if the disciples want to understand the nature of God, they only have to look at him, the One who has shown that love means service and self-giving – that is what the Father, God, is like.

If we are honest, perhaps many of us can identify with Philip's confusion. He wanted a direct revelation from God as absolute proof that Jesus was the Way. It is sobering to think that after three years of ministry, witnessing the miraculous works of Jesus and listening to his authoritative teaching that none of Jesus' disciples grasped the truth that God had made himself known in Jesus. They should have realised that the miracles were clear demonstrations of God's power working in Him.

Despite his frustration, Jesus promises his disciples that believers would do 'even greater things' and continue his ministry when he was not physically present.

The disciples are probably stunned. Jesus is speaking pre-Easter Event. Greater things can and will be done, but only because Jesus is going to the Father.

The book of Acts gives ample evidence of Jesus' prediction, including Stephen's forgiveness of his persecutors, echoing Jesus' words on the cross. Likewise, the worldwide spread of Christianity also signifies these 'greater things'.

There is also a link here between receiving the promises of Jesus and prayer. Faith and trust are key to prayer, as is the desire to bring glory to God: *'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.'*

The disciples are facing a time when, like us, they can't see Jesus, and reach out and touch him physically. The command *'Do not let your hearts be troubled'* is not difficult to understand, but when times are hard it is almost impossible to do.

When we are in situations that trouble us, the answer is to have a trust-relationship with Jesus, otherwise known as faith. When we have a relationship with Jesus, we know the One who died to triumph over death and rose again to enable us to share in life with God.

However, we are all a bit like Philip at one time or another, proclaiming that 'We do not know the way.' The very fact that we share how we feel with Jesus means that we do know the way: Jesus is the Way.

Very soon the disciples will be deeply troubled, but in the midst of those troubles, they know Jesus. Followers of Christ have light, even in the darkest of valleys.

Difficulties of interpretation (John 14: 6-7)

It is difficult to preach on John 14 without mentioning verses 6-7, which have been the source of theological debate and controversy:

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

These words have occasionally been used in theological combat to prove that Christians have God on their side and that people of all other faiths are condemned. This would be a misinterpretation of the intention. Embedded in these verses is the author's belief that our encounter with Jesus the Son of God makes possible a new experience of God as Father.

It is important to note that these words were spoken to the author's context and not to our contemporary context. John 14:6 is the joyous affirmation of a faith community that *does* believe that God is recognised in the life and death of Jesus. They also understand that the truth of God carries with it a great price, as their convictions

about Jesus had led them into conflict with Judaism and forced them into carving out a new religious home centred on the incarnation – a costly and painful process (as converts to Christianity have discovered throughout the centuries).

It is possible to read a sense of defiance into John 14 – a determination to hold onto the experience and knowledge of God in Jesus against all pressure to believe otherwise.

In effect, John 14:6-7 says:

‘We are who we are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been decisively revealed to us in Jesus Christ. To be ‘Jesus’ own’ we must recognise Jesus for who he is, which means recognising the revelation of God in him.’

John gives us the core claim of the Christian identity; what distinguishes Christians from peoples of other faiths is the conviction that through Jesus, Christians have access to God. The words of these verses are not weapons to be thrust as the final arbiter in discussions about the relative merits of different religions’ experiences and understanding of God.

Let’s pray:

Lord God, from whom we come,

in whom we are enfolded, to whom we shall return:

Bring us through this life; with the power of the Father protecting, with the love of Jesus indwelling, and the truth of the Spirit guiding, until we come to our dwelling-place in heaven, in life and love eternal. **Amen.**