

Fifth Sunday of Easter - John 14: 1 -14 - Year A
“ I am the way, the truth and the life...”

Imagine you are a Jew living in the 1st century. Your life is embedded in the life of the temple, the synagogue - its gatherings, its social coherency, its adherence to the Torah. But then something happens. You become a follower of the way, a follower of Jesus, you have come to believe that he is the Son of God and you make a public declaration of this.

So you are expelled from synagogue, you become a social outcast, it is as if you are dead to your former community. There is profound social and religious dislocation, what will you do, where is there a place for you, how will you still be able to have access to God? And then one day in the midst of the confusion and loss you attend a meeting of the Way and someone opens a scroll: “ Do not let your hearts be troubled...In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places....I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am, there you may be also”. What you are being told, is that you are not abandoned, you are not alone.

This passage comes from the section of John’s gospel known as the “Farewell Discourse”. It is Jesus’ last supper with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. His words of comfort and reassurance are for them; but the author is envisaging a much larger audience: the expelled and hurting Jewish followers of Jesus, and all who will declare Jesus is Lord.

These words of a dwelling place, or in other translations, “many rooms” are popular at funerals, reassurance of a celestial home when we die. I sometimes think about my room in the heavenly kingdom - the decor changes quite frequently. And when Jesus speaks of “dwelling places’, many have come to assume that Jesus is talking of a location, but his meaning is not spacial, its relational.

Elsewhere in the Johannean gospel, whenever dwelling is spoken of, it is not about physical structures, but family bonds such as the Father and Jesus dwelling in the believer. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the great symbol of God’s dwelling with his people was the Temple. What we see in these verses is a reinterpretation of where God now dwells. It is no longer a building but in a faith community, a living temple. Believers dwell in God, and he dwells in them.

The hearers of John's gospel are reassured that though they have been displaced from one dwelling place of God, they indeed have a home with the eternal God, and in a much deeper and unique way than they previously thought. They have previously unimaginable access and connection to the Father. Jesus reassures them they aren't just drifting aimlessly, "You know the way to the place where I am going". "You know the way"

Well God bless the ever pragmatic Thomas, he voices what I imagine the expelled Jewish Christians felt, how we all feel at times. "No, the way is not clear, how do we know which way to go." Then Jesus speaks some of the most famous words of the whole Scriptures, "I am the way the truth and the life." These are comforting words because they provide a road map to the Father: Jesus is the road map, he is the way.

Remember that John is writing to Jewish Christians who are no longer welcome to worship as they once did. Think of Stephen being stoned on the orders of religious leaders. Add to that, the many Christians being persecuted by the Romans for their faith. As are many of our brothers and sisters around the world today. Their survival as a community, even their individual safety is at stake. They are frightened, vulnerable people. Jesus, in following you, am I truly following the right path? Jesus, following you means I am risking a lot. I will have to give up a lot, I may lose a lot, even my life, to follow you. Is it worth it? ... Child, listen to my words, "I am the way, the truth and the life".

And then after these comforting words, we have some words that will comfort many, but also challenge many, "No one comes to the Father except through me". How do you feel when you hear these words: reassured, confused, embarrassed, skeptical? We now live in a post modern society - a multicultural, multi faith society, a very p.c. society. The only people we now tend to hear making such public strident exclusive claims about matters of faith are Isil and Richard Dawkins. And it doesn't sit well with many.

Some use these words as a litmus test for acceptance into the Christian faith, some as evidence for the superiority of the Christian religion. And sadly, these words have at times "been turned into a weapon with which to bludgeon one's perceived religious opponents into theological submission".

And not only theological submission. History is littered with triumphalist acts of violence and subjugation enabled in part by a particular interpretation of these words. I myself have judged who's in and who's out of God's kingdom, based in part, on these few words.

However, the more I read the bible, the more I am beginning to feel that God is so much more inclusive, than exclusive. One example being that last week we heard the story of the good shepherd. In unheard verses that follow, Jesus talks about bringing in other sheep that do not belong to this fold. Inclusive rather than exclusive.

In approaching these words, I found the following story intriguing. Karl Barth, probably the most famous theologian of the 20th century, was giving a lecture at Princeton. During the Q & A time a student asked him, "Sir, don't you think that God has revealed himself in other religions and not only in Christianity?" Barth's answer was "like a shock of bright lightning in that packed lounge". He answered, "No. God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has revealed himself in his Son".

Think about that for a moment. Note that the author of the gospel did not say, "No one comes to *God* except through me" but rather, "No one comes to the *Father* except through me". God as father is a very concrete and specific affirmation by a faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation, the life and death of Jesus. The writer is saying, "This is who we are. We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ, his Son".

It is therefore not so much about exclusivity but whether people inside this faith community truly understand their distinctiveness as Christians, it's about their own Christian identity. These verses proclaim this community's conviction and reassurance of the truth and life it has received in the incarnation - the relation of God in Jesus. To be Christian is to affirm, "In Jesus, I comprehend more than anywhere else what God is truly like. I see him as Father, and because of Jesus, as I dwell in him, he dwells in me". That was the good news for the displaced, persecuted Christians of John's day, it is good news for the persecuted Christians of today, and it is good news for us.