

OPENING SENTENCE:

Jesus said: “When you listen to me, can you not realize at once that what I am saying is God’s own truth?”

Sermon: In My Father’s House

Scripture: John 14:1-14

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In 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? And 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 will be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “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. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father, how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”*

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

In a very short time, life for the disciples was going to fall in. Their world was going to collapse in chaos around them. At such a time, there was only one thing to do – stubbornly hold on to trust in God. As the Psalmist had had it: “I believe that I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13). “But my eyes turn towards you, O God, my Lord; in you I seek refuge” (Psalm 14:8). There comes a time when we have to believe where we cannot prove and to accept where we cannot understand. If, in the darkest hour, we believe that somehow there is a purpose in life and that purpose is love, even the unbearable becomes bearable and even in the darkness there is a glimmer of light.

Jesus adds something to that. He says not only; “Believe in God.” He says also; “Believe in me.” If the Psalmist could believe in the ultimate goodness of God, how much more can we? For Jesus is the proof that God is willing to give us everything he has to give.

As Paul put it; “He who did not withhold his own son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Romans 8:32). If we believe that in Jesus we see the picture of God, then, in the face of that amazing love, it becomes not easy but at least possible to accept even what we cannot understand, and in the storms of life to retain a faith that is serene.

Jesus went on to say: “There are many dwelling places in my Father’s house.” By his Father’s house, he meant heaven. But what did he mean when he said there are many dwelling places in heaven?

The Jews held that in heaven there were different grades of blessedness which would be given according to people’s goodness and their fidelity on earth. In the world to come there are many mansions prepared for men; good for good; evil for evil. That picture likens heaven to a vast palace in which there are many rooms, with each individual assigned a room such as a person’s life merited. In Greek it means ‘stages upon the way’. It means that there are many stages on the way to heaven, and even in heaven there is progress and development and advance.

At least some of the great early Christian thinkers had that belief.

When people died, their souls went to some place called “Paradise”, which is still upon earth. There they received teaching and training and when they were worthy and fit, their souls ascended into the air. They then passed through various dwellings stages, until finally they reached the heavenly kingdom. In so doing, the souls followed Jesus who, as the writer of Hebrews said, “passed through the heavens” (Hebrews 4:14). But it may well be that the meaning is very simple and very lovely. “There are many dwelling places in my Father’s house” may simply mean that in heaven there is room for all. An earthly house becomes overcrowded; an earthly inn must sometimes turn away the weary traveler because its accommodation is exhausted. It is not so with our Father’s house, for heaven is as wide as the heart of God and there is room for all. Jesus is saying to his friends; “Don’t be afraid. In this world, people may shut their doors upon you. But in heaven you will never be shut out.”

There are other great truths within this passage. It tells of the honesty of Jesus. “If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?”, asked Jesus.

No one could ever claim to have been seduced into Christianity by misleading promises or under false pretenses. Jesus told people bluntly that the Christian must bid farewell to comfort (Luke 9:57-58). He told them of the persecution, the hatred and the penalties they would have to bear (Matthew 10:16-22). He told them of the cross which they must carry (Matthew 16:24), even though he told them also of the glory of the ending of the Christian way. He frankly and honestly told men and women that they might expect both glory and pain if they followed him. He was not a leader who tried to bribe his followers with promises of an easy way; he tried to challenge them into greatness. It tells us of the function of Jesus. He said, “I am going to prepare a place for you.” One of the great thoughts of the New Testament is that Jesus goes on in front for us to follow. (Like a shepherd). He opens up a way so that we may follow in his steps. One of the great words which is used to describe Jesus is the word forerunner. Are you familiar with the pilot boats which lead the larger boats through the hard to navigate parts of the waterways? That is what Jesus did. He blazed the way to heaven and to God that we might follow in his steps.

It tells us of the ultimate triumph of Jesus. He said, “I am coming again.” The second coming of Jesus is a doctrine which has to a large extent dropped out of Christian thinking and preaching. (Some people don’t like Revelation) The curious thing about it is that Christians seem either entirely to disregard it or to think of nothing else but it. It is true that we cannot tell when it will happen or what will happen; but one thing is certain – history is going somewhere. Without a climax, it would be necessarily incomplete. History must have a consummation, and that consummation will be the triumph of Jesus Christ; and he promises that in the day of his triumph he will welcome his friends. Jesus said, “Where I am, there you will also be”. Here is a great truth put in the simplest way; for the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is. We do not need to speculate on what heaven will be like. It is enough to know that we will be forever with him. When we love someone with our whole heart, we are really alive only when we are with that person. It is so with Christ. In this world, our contact with him is shadowy, for we can see only through the glass darkly, and spasmodically, for we are poor creatures and cannot live always on the heights. But the best definition is to say that heaven is that state where we will always be with Jesus.

Again and again, Jesus had told his disciples where he was going, but somehow, they never understood. “I will be with you a little while longer,” he said, “and then I am going to him who sent me” (John 7:33). He had told them that he was going to the Father who had sent him, and with whom he was one, but they still did not understand what was going on. Even less did they understand the way by which Jesus was going, for that way was the cross. At this moment, the disciples were bewildered men. There was one among them who could never say that he understood what he did not understand, and that was Thomas. He was far too honest and far too much in earnest to be satisfied with any vague, pious expressions. Thomas had to be sure. So, he expressed his doubts and his failure to understand, and the wonderful thing is that it was the question of a doubting man which provoked one of the greatest things Jesus ever said. No one need be ashamed of having doubts; for it is amazingly and blessedly true that those who seek will in the end find. Jesus said to Thomas; “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

That is a great saying to us, but it would be still greater to a Jew who heard it for the first time. In it, Jesus took three of the great basic conceptions of Judaism and made the tremendous claim that in him all three found their full realization.

The Jews talked much about the path or way in which people must walk and the ways of God. God said to Moses; “You shall not turn to the right or the left. You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you” (Deuteronomy 5:32-33). Moses said to the people; “I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I commanded you” (Deuteronomy 31:29). Isaiah had said; “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, This is the way; walk in it” (Isaiah 30:21). In the brave new world, there would be a highway called *the Way of Holiness*, and in it the traveler, even though a simple soul, would not become lost (Isaiah 35:8). It was the psalmist’s prayer; “Teach me your way, O Lord” (Psalm 27:11). The Jews knew much about the way of God in which they must walk. And Jesus said; “I am the way”.

What did he mean? Suppose we are in a strange town and ask for directions. Suppose the person you asked says; “Take the first road to the right, and the second to the left. Cross the square, go past the church, take the third road on the right and the road you want will be the fourth one on the left.” The chances are that we will be lost before we get half-way. But suppose the person we asked says; “Come. I’ll take you there.” In that case, the person to us is the way, and we cannot miss it. That is what Jesus does for us. He does not only give advice and directions. He takes us by the hand and leads us; he strengthens us and guides us personally every day. He does not tell us about the way; he is the way. Jesus said, “I am the truth,” The psalmist said; “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth” (Psalm 86:11). “For your steadfast love is before my eyes” he said, “and I walk in faithfulness to you” (Psalm 26:3). “I have chosen the way of faithfulness” (Psalm 119:30). Many people have told us the truth, but no one ever embodied it. There is one all-important thing about moral truth. A person’s character does not really affect the teachings of geometry or astronomy or Latin verbs. But if someone proposes to teach moral truth, that person’s character makes all the difference in the world. An adulterer who teaches the necessity of purity, a grasping person who teaches the value of generosity, a domineering person who teaches the value of humility, an embittered person that teaches the beauty of love, is bound to be ineffective. Moral truth cannot be conveyed solely in words; it must be conveyed in example. And that is precisely where the greatest human teacher must fall down. No teacher has ever embodied the truth that he or she taught – except Jesus. Many could say, “I have taught you the truth.” Only Jesus could say, “I am the truth.” The tremendous thing about Jesus is not simply that the statement of moral perfection finds its peak in him; it is that the fact of moral perfection finds its realization in him.

Jesus said, “I am the life.” In the last analysis, what we are always hunting for, seeking for is life. Our search is not for knowledge for its own sake, but for what will make life worth living.

Robert Browning tells of two people who have fallen in love. One says, “I never knew what life was until I saw it in your eyes.” Love had brought life. That is what Jesus does. Life with Jesus is life indeed. And there is one way of putting all this, Jesus said, “No one comes to the father except through me.” He alone is the way to God. In him alone we see what God is like; and he alone can lead us into God’s presence without fear and without shame.

To the Greeks, God was characteristically “The Invisible”; the Jews would count it as an article of faith that no one had seen God at any time. To people who thought like that, Jesus said, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father too.” Then Philip asked what he must have believed to be the impossible. Maybe he was thinking back to that tremendous day when God revealed his glory to Moses (Exodus 33:12-23). But even in that great day, God had said to Moses, “You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

In the time of Jesus, people were oppressed and fascinated by what is called the transcendence of God and by the thought of the difference and the distance between God and human beings. They would never have dared to think that they could see God. Then Jesus says with utter simplicity; “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” To see Jesus is to see what God is like. It has been said that Luke in his gospel “domesticated God”, meaning that Luke shows us God in Jesus taking a share in the most intimate and homely things. When we see Jesus, we can say, “This is God living our life.” That being so, we can say the most precious things about God. Anyone in the ancient world would have thought that if God did come to this world, he would come as a king into some royal palace with all the might and majesty which the world calls greatness. In Jesus, we see God upon the cross. There is nothing so incredible as this in all the world. It is easy to imagine a God who condemns people; it is still easier to imagine a God who, if people opposed him, wipes them out. No one would ever have dreamed of a God who chose the cross to obtain our salvation. “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus goes on to say something else. The Jews believed in the one true God. The danger of the Christian faith is that we may set up Jesus as a kind of secondary God. But Jesus himself insists that the things he said and the things he did came not from his own initiative or his own power or his own knowledge but from God. His words were God’s voice speaking to us. His deeds were God’s power flowing through him to us. He was a channel by which God came to us. He brought God’s accent, God’s message, God’s mind and God’s heart to men and women. Because God so loved the world. At the back of Jesus, and in Jesus, there is God.

“This is the truth I tell you – he that believes in me will do the works that I do, and he will do greater works than these,” (V.12)

First of all, Jesus said that one day his disciples would do what he did, and even greater works. What did he mean? In the early days the early Church possessed the power of working cures. Paul mentions among the gifts which different people had was that of healing. (1Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30). James urged that when any Christians were sick, the elders should pray over them and anoint them with oil. (James 5:14).

It could be said that the early church did the things which Jesus did, but did it do greater things than he did? As time has gone on, human beings have more and more learned to conquer disease. The physicians and the surgeons nowadays have powers which to the ancient world would have seemed miraculous and even Godlike. The surgeons with new techniques, the physicians with new treatments and miracle drugs, can now affect the most amazing cures. One by one the citadels of pain and disease have been stormed. The noticeable thing about this is that it was the power and influence of Jesus Christ which brought it about. Why should we strive to save the weak and sick and the dying, those whose bodies are broken and whose minds are darkened? Why is it that men and women of skill and science have felt moved, even compelled, to spend their time and their strength, to ruin their health and sometimes to sacrifice their lives, to find cures for disease and relief from pain? The answer is that, whether they knew it or not, Jesus was saying to them through his Spirit; “These people must be helped and healed. You must do it. It is your responsibility and your privilege to do all you can for them.”

It is Jesus who has been behind the conquest of disease; and as a result things can be done now which in the time of Jesus no one would ever have imagined possible.

But we are still not at the meaning of this. Think of what Jesus had actually done in his lifetime. He had never preached outside Palestine. Within his lifetime, Europe had never heard the gospel. He had never personally met the moral degradation of a city like Rome. Even his opponents in Palestine were religious men; the Pharisees and the scribes had given their lives to religion as they saw it. It was not in his lifetime that Christianity went out to a world where marriage was set at naught, where adultery was not even a conventional sin, and where vice flourished like a tropical forest. It was into that world that early Christians went; and it was that world which they won for Christ. He says that this will happen because he is going to His Father. What does he mean by that? In his days on earth, he was limited to Palestine;

when he had died and risen again, he was liberated from these limitations, and his Spirit could work mightily anywhere.

Jesus says that any prayer offered in his name will be granted. Note carefully what Jesus said – *Not* that all our prayers would be granted, but that our prayers *Made in his name* would be granted. When we pray, we must always ask: can we honestly make this prayer in the name of Jesus? The prayer that can stand the test of that consideration, and which in the end says, Your will be done, is always answered. But the prayer based on self cannot expect to be granted.

CLOSING PRAYER: O God, form the minds of your faithful people into a single will. Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true Joy is found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

What we know of God in Jesus Christ is that God has chosen not to be God without us. In this love, the love that is God. God's promise to love us, to make room for us, to know and be known by us, never ends. Therefore our hearts need never be troubled. GO IN PEACE!