



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 28th September 2003
by Mark Ashton

10p

John 14:1-7

One Way to know God?

‘ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

‘Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

‘Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him” ’ (John 14:1-7).

Look again at that first verse, where Jesus says, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”* I have no idea how troubled our hearts here in this building now may be. There will certainly be some here who have dark fears and serious misgivings about the future. You may be really worried and anxious about what the next few months or years may hold. But there will be others of us who are relatively carefree and light-hearted. And I am going to try to talk to everyone, whatever your mood may be, however the future may appear to you and whatever your faith may be: whether you’d say you have a strong faith or whether you’d say, “Well, really I’ve got no faith at all at the moment.” Because we’re considering some words that have reverberated down the centuries since they were first spoken 2,000 years ago: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.”* and *‘Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.” ’*

Those words have been found meaningful in every age – under the Roman Empire when they were first spoken, in the Dark Ages that followed, in the medieval world, in the Renaissance, in the 17th, 18th, 19th Centuries and right on to today at the beginning of the 21st Century: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me . . . I am the way and the truth and the life . . .”* Jesus’ disciples were deeply troubled because after three glorious years with Him, He has just said, “It’s all over. It’s come to an end. One of you is going to betray me; another of you is going to deny me.” They were upset by that news. And His comfort to them in their distress was to tell them to trust in God. He would provide a destination for them: a place to which they would go. Look at it again: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”* (vv. 1-3). To find their bearings at this dark moment they needed to know their ultimate destination, according to Jesus.

We had a visitor to the Vicarage earlier this year, who had a car equipped with a satellite navigation system. I don’t know if you have come across such a thing. There may be somebody here who owns one. It was quite astounding: he switched on the display on the dashboard and it indicated which direction the car was parked in the Vicarage car park. He told me it talks to him as he drives – about each turning, each roundabout, each junction. He told us that earlier this summer it had guided him door-to-door from his home in Edinburgh to his holiday hotel in France. Interestingly, of all the guests we have had at the Vicarage in the last few years he was, I think, the least punctual. He arrived two hours late, because earlier in the day he had programmed the car with the wrong destination.

If we get the destination wrong, we haven't a chance of getting the route right. If we don't know where we are going we are bound to be bewildered by life. Look at it again: ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”*** (vv. 1-3).

But I am not actually sure that we are very interested in our destination nowadays, are we? Whatever personal burdens we may be carrying at the moment, life in the Western world at the beginning of the 21st Century is very comfortable. We have peace, stability, prosperity, health-care and freedom – and the present is good enough. We don't care to think very much on death, do we?– let alone on what lies beyond death. One ancient gravestone had this inscription on it, as though the dead man were addressing me, the living:

Remember, friend, when passing by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, soon you will be.
Prepare for death, and follow me.

To that two further lines had been added:

To follow you, I'm not content
Until I know which way you went.

But they are not sentiments we buy into today at all, are they? We don't think about death, and we certainly don't think what lies beyond death – not until we get close to death. As a clergyman, inevitably I spend some of my time with the dying. They think very hard about death. But that is not this gathering, by and large. I don't think I can expect you to do that at this moment.

So I want to suggest that Thomas' words in verse 5 have quite a contemporary ring to them: ***‘Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”*** ' Isn't that quite contemporary? We don't know for certain if there is a heaven or a hell, so how can we know how to live here and now? Or what way we should walk through life? ***“Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”*** If there's no ultimate difference between good and evil, why should I get too concerned about them in my daily living?

Actually I think we are living at a rather strange moment in Western civilisation, because our society, here in the UK, is based on a Christian premise: that there is moral accountability – that eventually I will have to answer for how I behave. And that premise at the moment still controls the way we conduct ourselves publicly (think of the Hutton enquiry, going on at the moment). And to a lesser extent it controls how we conduct ourselves privately. But it is a premise most people no longer actually believe. We don't believe there's going to be a Judgment after death. And sooner or later that belief, or rather the absence of that belief, will take control of our behaviour. So at the moment this country is parasitic on the Christian faith. The country owes its stability and its freedom to Christianity, which teaches us that we are morally accountable: that our behaviour matters and that we will have to answer for it. But the country is busy severing its links with that Christian faith. We are like a great passenger liner which has slipped its moorings. And the passengers are wining and dining, dancing and partying; enjoying everything that a luxury cruise has to offer, thinking themselves safe and secure. But the ship is actually adrift and will eventually hit the rocks. ***“Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”***

Here's our version of Thomas' question: “I don't know for certain that there's an ultimate destination, so why should I let that affect the way I behave now? What matters most is my own freedom to choose, to be myself, to make my own mind up, to steer my own course through life. If I don't know where I'm going in the end, how can I have a better guide than my own integrity here and now?” But I want to suggest that there are two faults in that way of thinking: (a) it brings me into constant collision with other people (often those who are nearest and dearest to me). If my will crosses their will, who wins? (b) It brings me into ultimate collision with God. If this is a created universe, then it doesn't actually centre around me, but around the God who made it and who made me. I am actually accountable for my behaviour to Him. And if I try to live in any other way, I am a rebel against Him.

But: get that destination clear (that we are heading to God) and it makes the route clear (according to Jesus). I once heard a motorist in Jesus Lane (if you know the Cambridge city-centre, the enormity of this request will be clear to you) ask a traffic warden the way to the Red Lion car park. He picked the right person, the traffic warden was up to it: in three simple and memorable sentences he told the motorist where to go (they were polite sentences). If you know where you want to go and you ask the right person, you'll be OK.

But these few verses that we are looking at together are saying more than that. We need to look at the final verses: *'Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him"'* (John 14:5-7). Earlier, in those verses we have already looked at, Jesus had already defined the destination, in terms of His own Person: *"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"* (v. 3b). And here in verses 6 and 7 He doesn't go on to say that He will be a guide and a companion along the way. But He says: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."* Jesus has been using the language of places, of locations and routes. But He is actually speaking of people rather than places; about relationships rather than geography. In effect, He is saying here to Thomas, "Heaven is not a location towards which you must journey. It is a relationship with Me which you have already begun: *"No-one comes to the Father except through me."*"

There's no mistaking a claim like that. There is no toning it down. Jesus did not say He was a way to God, one way among many. He said He was the way; and that no-one comes to the Father except through Him. This is entirely different from all other great religious leaders. There have been crackpot leaders that the world hasn't taken seriously who have said the same sort of thing. But no great religious leader has made claims approaching these claims that Jesus made. C.S. Lewis put it better than anybody else could put it, so I make no apologies for quoting him on this: 'If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, "Are you the son of Brahmah?" he would have said, "My son, you are still in the vale of illusion." If you had gone to Socrates and asked, "Are you Zeus?" he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, "Are you Allah?" he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off.' But when Thomas questioned Jesus, He replied: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."* It is not a route map, not a set of moral guidelines (try to live this way, try to do this, try to go in that direction . . .), not a philosophical proposition (get your head around these difficult concepts), it is a Person we are offered. A Person who stands on both sides of death.

Christianity does not say to you and me, "Put your faith in Jesus, and when you die you will go to be with Him in the sky for ever." Christianity says, "Invite Him into your life now." He is alive this side of the grave. And you can verify that by starting a relationship with Him today. *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."* The death and the resurrection of Jesus mean (a) that He is alive and in this room now, and (b) that He has removed the barrier between us and God; between you and God: the barrier that has resulted from our rebellion against God, from our refusal to acknowledge Him. It's just the way we've lived our lives in our own way: we've been nice people, we've been well-behaved people; but we haven't had a lot of time for God – the God who made us and gave us our lives in the first place. It's what the Bible calls sin: it's the act of rebellion against Him – which is what causes the separation between us and Him. And Jesus' death dealt with that.

We're not offered a route-map to make sense of our lives. We are not even offered a Tour Guide to get us safely to a future destination. We are offered a living Saviour whose Spirit will live within us to turn our lives inside out, and to take us through death into eternity.

And that's why these words that we are looking at together have meant so much to so many people. This room is full now of people whose lives Jesus has entered; and who would agree with me that He is more real to us than you are! And I want to ask you if you have realised that: that Christianity is not about turning over a new leaf. I struggled with that for so long in my life, trying harder to be better. It is about receiving a new life: Jesus entering my heart and living in me.

I want to end with that challenge to everyone here now. Have you asked Him into your life? And if not, would you consider doing so? Maybe you'd say, *Well, that's a bit extreme. I don't mind getting a little bit religious, but that is going further than I want to go.* Well, it may be that that is why He is not really a reality for you and God is so distant and so remote; and the whole idea of God is actually fairly oppressive and antagonistic to you.

There are two sorts of folk I particularly want to talk to as I finish. Inside the Order of Service there is a little brightly coloured leaflet that mentions a course we run. It is for those who would like to investigate the Person of Jesus Christ. That's what it's about: "How can I be sure God is really there? How can there be a loving God in a world of suffering?" We find the answer to those questions is Jesus. So that is what the course will be about – and the little slip mentions the actual dates and the place. If you would like to fill that little tear-off page at the back, you can post it or pop it into our own post-box at the back of church, as you leave.

But I also want to think that maybe there is one person here now who is thinking, *Well I think I would like to take this a little further tonight.* So I'm going to say a simple prayer now which you might like to echo in your heart. If you do so, I would encourage you to have a word with me or some other Christian afterwards. I will say this prayer slowly now, and if it's right for you to echo it you can repeat it in your own heart after me.

May we pray together?

Lord God, I know that I do not know You; in fact I've ignored you and deserve separation from You as a punishment for the way I've ignored You. Please forgive me.

Lord God, I see that Jesus can bring me back to You – that He died to take my punishment, and lives to be my Saviour. I want to trust Him now.

Please may He come into my heart now, forgiving my sin and giving me new life. Amen.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)