

Some thoughts on the Gospel according to St. John 14.1-14 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells the disciples that in His Father's house are many rooms, and that he is going to prepare a place for us.

Perhaps our first reaction to these words would be: I would like to know more about those rooms. I would like to know exactly what Jesus means by these words. I want to know when this is going to happen, and how, and I want to know what those rooms look like - quite natural reactions really.

But why would we want answers to these questions?

Well, we are a goal-driven culture. We like to know our destination, where we are going in life. We say things like, "if you don't know where you are going, how will you know when you get there." We want our churches and our lives and our work to be purpose-driven. We want to be effective - accomplishing goals set in advance. We like mission statements.

When I was a young child - some time ago I hasten to add, but perhaps not as long ago as some of you might think! - we used to go up to Lancashire to spend holidays with an aunt who was married to a gamekeeper on the moors at the back of Bolton - I used to try the patience of my parents by persistently asking questions like are we nearly there, how much longer will it take - have we got enough petrol. These questions would, so I was told, be asked in rotation at approximately hourly intervals - and the journey took about 8-10 hours!! Sue tells me that I am a little better now!! Yes, we can have a phobia about the unknown future. It can be unsettling - at worse frightening.

Jesus' disciples clearly share these sentiments - disciples who in this reading are clearly confused.

"Lord", they say, "we do not know where you are going".

This story from our reading is placed here in John's Gospel at the beginning of the story of the Passion, the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He has shared with the disciples his last Passover meal, and washed their feet. Judas has gone out to betray Him. He has told the disciples that he is going to his death. He is trying to prepare them for that time.

"Lord", the disciples say, "we do not know where you are going". What in all probability they really want is for Jesus to tell them more about their destination. It would be nice if Jesus answered their question - but he doesn't.

Jesus doesn't talk any more about those rooms. He doesn't talk any more about the destination. He doesn't talk about the end of the journey.

Instead, instead, He talks about the journey itself.

For He says to them, I am the way. I am the journey. He won't tell them where they are going - **but** - how they are going to get there, for He tells them⁴ "And you know the way to the place where I am going."^{*}

Then Thomas says to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'⁶ Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know^{*} my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

So, Jesus is telling them that the journey is an integral part of the destination - that without following Him on our life's journeys, we cannot expect to come to the Father - to spend eternity in God's loving presence in the many rooms that Jesus talks about.

No - we can't get there without the hard, confusing, joyful and frequently painful business of living, but we must always remain true to Jesus - no matter what temptations and distractions life might throw at us.

But the disciples still do not really understand what Jesus is trying to explain to them; "Show us the father", Philip says, "and we will be satisfied".

What is it that they want? What is it about the Father that could satisfy them? Do they want to know how to live? Do they think that Jesus is withholding secrets that the Father will give them? Do they think Jesus is holding back on something?

"Philip," says Jesus. Don't you know me yet? If you've seen me, you've seen the father. You have seen what there is to see.

God is in all of us - part of our very being - abides in us, as John says, but there is a lot about us that makes us opaque, so that the God in us does not always shine out so that others can see. We hide the God in us for all sorts of reasons. It is as if we are hiding ourselves.

Sometimes, we hide to protect our real selves. If people knew who we really were, we think they wouldn't like us. If people knew what we feared, they would have power over us. If people knew what we most longed for, they would laugh at us. If people knew what we thought, they would punish us. But we should always remember that hiding ourselves, hides God too.

Jesus is not opaque, He is transparent. Jesus does not hide. God shines through Jesus. Martin Luther said that to see Jesus is to see God; that what Jesus does, God does. One scholar said "the ... heart of God, mirrored in Jesus Christ, is actually revealed", and in the midst of a world of flesh and blood, dirt, water and suffering, God acts through His son Jesus Christ - God made man." If you have seen me, Jesus says, you have seen God.

To grow in Christ is to move toward being as transparent to God as our human nature will allow - so that others can see God in us more and more clearly.

This is not something we need to wait until the distant future to do. It is something that needs doing now. This is the work that the church is bound to do through sacrament, practice, prayer - and witness to those around us.

So, what can "many rooms" mean for us?

Well, when someone like Krister Stendahl - a well known Swedish Lutheran theologian, encourages works for ecumenical and interfaith respect and mutual respect amongst all peoples—perhaps he sees and shows us rooms that we cannot see - in other words - yet unrealised ways of expressing God's love and bringing His kingdom on earth to more of His people.

After all, God's house is very big, bigger than we can possibly imagine. But though there are rooms for us, the house is God's, not ours. God decides who gets a key. And I suspect he has lots of those keys.

I'm sure that as soon as the disciples heard Jesus' talk about that house, they were not comforted as Jesus has hoped. I'm sure they began to worry about it, just as we do. Are there enough rooms? Is there one for me? What are they like? And the disciples worried about the future, just as we do.

Jesus knows they—we—worry about how things are going to turn out. He tries to set their minds at ease as He does ours: He tells us not to be troubled over this. Jesus doesn't have to encourage us to fret about the future—we do that naturally. He does, it seems, have to caution us not to forget the journey to get there; perhaps as a small boy, I should have thought more about the journey to Lancashire, rather than how quickly we would get there.

Jesus teaches us to walk humbly and confidently on the journey through our lives, becoming free to reveal the God in us - to those around.

He doesn't tell us about the house with many rooms so that we can move heaven and earth to get there as fast as we can. He tells us about the house - so that we can know as we travel the sometimes happy, sometimes sad journey through life with Him, that the rooms in His house are ready and waiting.

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