

Year A Easter 5 The Heart of God John 14 vv1 to 14

This passage is full of phrases that have caused trouble and distress over the years, phrases such as: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” “Ask anything in my name and I will give it to you.” “You will do greater works than I.” I am quite sure that none of us has turned water into wine or caused a lame man to walk with simply a word. I know plenty of people who feel that their prayers go unheard. I am certain that devout believers in God who have difficulty believing also in Jesus Christ as God are not doomed to death rather than everlasting life. Let us take a closer look at what this passage is and this will help to clear up these things which it is not.

Jesus is at supper with his disciples – his last supper with them – and he is, in a nutshell, saying “Good-bye” to them. He has washed their feet and explained to them what this means. He has told them of his imminent betrayal and Judas has slipped off into the night to do just that. He has told Peter, faithful Peter, that he will soon deny his teacher and friend. He has told all of the disciples that he is shortly leaving them and they cannot follow – not yet.

It is no wonder the disciples are troubled. None of this is good news: betrayal, denial, Jesus leaving...their world is crashing down around them. This Gospel today is Jesus’ reassurance to them, his comfort for them in this time of anxiety. “Don’t let your heart be troubled,” he tells them. “Believe in God and believe also in me.” Jesus is calling them back into the relationship of love and trust that will sustain them in his physical absence. But, more than that: Notice the wording he uses. Don’t let your “heart” be troubled: a group of 11 disciples, one heart. He is calling them into unity with each other just as we are called to be one body for we

all share in the one bread. They – and we – are to be the comfort and strength of each other, together, one with each other as he and the Father are one.

Jesus assures them that he is not abandoning them. He is returning to his Father but this is good news for them. They will have him with them always in the gift of the Holy Spirit and their final destination, he says, is life with God and in God, just as it is for him. When Jesus tells them that they know way to this destination, Thomas thinks only of physical roadway and insists that, in fact, they do not know the way. Thomas wants directions, a roadmap to show the way. Jesus responds to this with the well-known: I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This has, unfortunately, been used by many to indicate the superiority of Christianity over other religions. It has been used as nearly a threat to nonbelievers: accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour to be saved...or else...

But this is to take Jesus’ words out of context and to destroy the spirit and intent of what he was saying and why he was saying it. These are words of comfort and assurance to a group who know him, who have heard and seen his words and his works. These are words of promise: If you know me – and you do, he says – then you know the Father also. Jesus is telling them that they have him and he is all that they need. There is no need to panic, no need to search for a secret map. “From now on,” he says, “you do know God and you have seen God.” John clarifies that this promise of comfort and assurance extends to us even now: Adored by God are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We do know

God, we do see God, we see and hear the works and words of a God who is present with us.

This time it is Philip who expresses uncertainty and helps us hear more from Jesus on the subject. Philip insists, “Jesus, show us the Father and we will be convinced.” With undoubtedly more than a little exasperation, Jesus responds, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). This is an echo of the very beginning of John’s Gospel: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (1:18). From beginning to end, John writes so that we may believe and have abundant life in God through Jesus Christ.

This is Jesus’ mission throughout the Gospel – to make God known to us, to reveal who God is, through him. Jesus is the fullest revelation of the person and character of God. All the words that Jesus has spoken, all the works that he has done, come from God and show us who God is. “The Father, who dwells in me, does his works,” Jesus says (14:10-11).

These works, Jesus instructs, are now ours to carry on. We will do even greater works, Jesus insists, because he is going to the Father. How is this possible? Jesus healed the blind and raised the dead. We mustn’t expect to do work in the same way that Jesus did – with miraculous power that brought instant, spectacular, jaw-dropping results. Perhaps some people have the power to heal with a touch. I am not saying that God cannot ever work through us like that. Yet, even miracles do not have the power to convince people to believe. There were many witnesses to Jesus’ “signs” all through John’s Gospel and many of these people who saw the miracles with their own eyes did not see and believe.

But how do we do the works of Jesus and how do we do greater works than he did? John calls Jesus' miracles "signs" for a good reason – all that he did were signs of God's kingdom. Jesus' works were to show us and tell us what life *is* in God's arriving kingdom. Although it may be beyond us to open the eyes of the blind, for example, what Jesus accomplished was to show love and compassion, he was giving to others the wholeness of spirit that comes through welcome and inclusion. Jesus opened the people's eyes to the brokenness of the world's social and economic structures and teach us the way of equality through serving, through humility, through sharing and through love. These we are called to show to the world as well. But in a greater way than Jesus? He assures us that, yes, we will do greater works because he is going to the Father. In other words, in Jesus' physical absence he will give to us the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. Whereas one man, Jesus of Nazareth, could speak to several thousands of people, could show the way of life in God's kingdom to crowds gathered around him, there are now millions – one body of Christ – able to spread the news of the kingdom, able to show to millions of others the way of life in God's kingdom. And whereas one man was limited to one little piece of the planet around Nazareth and Capernaum, and Jerusalem, the one body of Christ now stretches around the world reaching into corners never visited by the physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Much of our works of God, revealing the kingdom and spreading the news of its arrival is accomplished through prayer. In prayer we are in God's presence. In prayer we listen for God's direction. Jesus tells us that if we ask anything in his name, he will do it. There is a beautiful image in the book of God's Revelation to John which describes all of our prayers being put before God as incense. Why is it

that some of these prayers go unanswered – or at least seem to? I would be presuming to know the mind of God if I gave you reasons for why some prayers don't seem to be answered. I do know that we can and do pray and that God hears. Bishop Stephen Cottrell writes that, in prayer, our job is to provide the water. It is then up to God to change the water into wine, in God's way and in God's time. The Bible actually contains quite a few examples of unanswered prayer. King David urgently prayed that his first-born son would not die but the child died. Paul prayed fervently on multiple occasions for God to remove a mysterious ailment that he named as a "thorn in his side". He was never healed. What if David's first son had survived and become king instead of Solomon? What if Paul had been cured, making him a more agile missionary perhaps but one of insufferable pride as he feared? (Philip Yancy, *Prayer*, p.234). Jesus' assurance of answered prayers "underscores the relationship, the companionship with God. The more we know God, the more we know God's will, the more likely our prayers will align with that will" (*Prayer*, p.235). Philip Yancy, in his book called *Prayer*, writes of a friend who provides resources to an underground church in China. He asked this friend how the Chinese people pray and "she replied that their prayers very closely follow the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. The church, she said, has spread most widely among the lower classes, and when they ask for daily bread and deliverance from evil, they mean it literally. She continued, 'I've heard Chinese Christians pray for the leaders of their government, but never for a change in the government – even in areas that persecute the unregistered churches. They pray very practically, thanking God for today's grace, asking for tomorrow's protection. They tell us visitors don't pray for me to get out of prison,

please pray for courage and strength so that I can witness boldly in the prison and not lose faith.” (p.238-9).

Jesus promises to be with us through the power of the Spirit, to work in and through us to accomplish his purpose of revealing God and God’s kingdom in the world. This does not necessarily happen in easily visible, spectacular ways. Yet wherever there is healing, reconciling, life-giving work happening, this is the work of God. Wherever there is life in abundance, this is Jesus’ presence in our midst (paraphrase of Elizabeth Johnson, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (1:18). Jesus has made known to us the heart of God, and he has entrusted this mission of “making known” to us. Let us continue in faithful and in new ways to make known the heart of God to the world.