

# **Sermon on Sunday 10 May 2020**

## **by Rev. Alan Stewart**

### **The Father's House**

As a teenager, my bedroom was a refuge from the world.

In this room, papered in Smiths posters and woodchip, I could close the door and escape. Here, I did my homework... and did my crying. Here, I listened to the soundtrack of my adolescence on a cheap Woolworths turntable and memorized the lyrics to a thousand songs. In this room, surrounded by the debris of a teenage life, I wrestled with the Big Questions; Who am I? Will I ever find love? Who's on *Top of the Pops* this week?

This unremarkable bedroom was my sanctuary; a place to call my own; in some ways, a sacred place. When my brother, for instance, would steal in to 'borrow' something, always it felt like a trespass; a violation.

Maybe we're all in search of a place to call our own; a space sacred to us; a place we feel safe enough to be ourselves.

Hours before his arrest, in a touching farewell speech, Jesus talks of going ahead of his friends to prepare a place for them; a room, he says, in his Father's House.

His words are full of reassurance; they know he's going, and their hearts are breaking, and they're afraid, so Jesus talks of a reunion

in this House of many rooms. It's such a kind and tender and inclusive way of saying; 'we'll meet again; promise'.

Poignant words; then as now.

Notice how Jesus again assumes the role of a servant. Moments before, he'd washed their feet; now he becomes their house-keeper!

In preparing a guest room, usually we'd spring-clean; we'd put on fresh bedlinen, set out the guest towels. We might even leave a little gift on a pillow or adapt the room for our guest's particular needs.

This is the imagery Jesus is using; he will personally attend to such needs; extend this hospitality to his friends; make for them a home; a place to call their own.

Perhaps you, too, have taken comfort in these words of Jesus. Most often, of course, we associate this Father's House with the after-life; with that home-coming we call 'heaven'.

Jesus' timing, however, is interesting. Surely, he knew at that point that he would see them again this side of heaven; post resurrection? If he was only talking about the after-life, wouldn't these words have made more sense just before his final departure; his ascension?

So, maybe Jesus isn't just speaking of a homecoming in the next life; maybe he's also talking of coming home to the Father in this life.

You see, eternal life isn't just about what happens when we die; eternal life begins now. It's not ultimately about living forever in the next life, it's about living in all its fullness in this life; it's about coming home to the Father here and now.

Jesus, like no-one before him, revealed the Fatherhood of God. His God was the Father of patient waiting; of tender embraces; of unquestioning forgiveness; of extravagant hospitality. And it is into this relationship; this intimacy, that his friends, then and now, are called.

And Jesus tells his friends, 'You know how to get there', and Thomas says, 'No, we don't', to which Jesus famously replies, '*I'm* the Way... and the Truth and the Life; no-one comes to the Father except through me'.

Those words have, over the centuries, become very exclusive; many interpret them to mean: 'You only get to heaven by trusting in Jesus in this lifetime'. I think that, however, is to massively miss the point and to forget the context of those words.

Jesus isn't here trying to convince an inter-faith conference that Christianity is the only way to God. He's not engaging in apologetics, in making an argument that only those very few who discover his words, and respond with faith in this life, will make it to heaven. He's saying goodbye to friends and he's using the

language of love to help those friends know that they won't ever lose him. He's saying, I'm the one who will continue to reveal to you the Father-heart of God, both in this life and in the next.

It's one of seven times, actually, in John's gospel where Jesus, begins with those words; 'I am', where he's deliberately referencing that encounter, centuries before, when Moses asked God for his name, and God replied with those two words; 'I am'.

This Gospel of John is grappling with this huge and baffling claim that Jesus and the Father are One; that Jesus is a manifestation of divine Love itself; in other words, Jesus is Christ. Now, Christ, contrary to popular belief, isn't Jesus' surname. Christ, as Richard Rohr says, is another name for the fullness of God in everything.

So, when he claims that 'no-one comes to the Father except through me', he's talking not simply as Jesus, as one man in history, but as 'I am'; as Christ; in John's language, as the Word made flesh. He's saying that Christ is the way. And no one religion can ever claim a monopoly on the fullness of God in everything.

We come to the Father-nature of God through Christ, be that in this life or in the next.

But, ultimately, it's not actually about finding our way to him; because we're already found. Like Thomas, we just need to wake up to the fact that Christ, our Way, our Truth, our Life, is already within us. We're already home.

And when we accept that, then we need never feel homeless or lost again.

Wherever, physically, you are at this moment; whether those four walls feel like a refuge or sometimes like a prison; wherever and however you are, remember you are home; you are already in that Father's House of many rooms.

Seven days ago, I heard the heartbreaking news that a beautiful soul, one of our own, chose to end the pain she could no longer live with; a tragedy for which there are not enough tears in the world. And we would never stop weeping if we did not trust that the Father, as revealed through Jesus, in that moment opened his arms and welcomed his child home. We hold fast to those reassuring words of the one who goes ahead to prepare a place; 'we'll meet again, promise'.

Let me end with those beautiful words that Stephane introduced us to in one of his Thoughts for the Day this week. It's from Thomas Keating, speaking of that Presence we sometimes call Christ.

'This Presence is so immense, yet so humble, awe-inspiring yet so gentle, limitless, yet so intimate, tender and personal. I know that I am known. Everything in my life is transparent in this Presence. It knows everything about me – all my weaknesses, brokenness, sinfulness – and still loves me infinitely. This Presence is healing, strengthening, refreshing – just by its Presence. It is non-judgemental, self-giving, seeking no reward, boundless in compassion. It is like coming home to a place I should never have

left, to an awareness that was somehow always there, but which I did not recognise’.

Today, may you recognise that Presence in you and with you, and may you be at home with yourself, and with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

