

Third Sunday after Easter

Isaiah 25. 1 & 6-9, Colossians 3. 1-11, Psalm 66. 1-5 & 7, John 14. 1-11.

The Collect: Living Father, who has given thine only Son to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life: grant that in him we may faithfully seek thee, joyfully find thee and for ever possess thee, God blessed for ever. Amen.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen. +

5 Thomas said 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. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.' 8 Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' "DO you see the Light"?

'In my Father's house there are many mansions' or 'dwelling places or rooms. Generations of people have found comfort in those words usually used at funerals. It's comforting to think that death is like a relocation, house-moving from one place to another, going upmarket, say, from Pembroke dock to Pembroke, or is it the other way round or do we have in mind a sort of National Trust house, hopefully without stamp duty or community charge or local income tax, but u can't get away from that can you.

There's an old joke. A man died and was ushered into heaven, which appeared to be an enormous house. An angel began to escort him down a long hallway, past 'many rooms. 'What's in that room? That's the Anglican Catholic's, said the angel. And that room, who's in that room? That's the Orthodox. Now, said the angel, we have to be very quiet as we go past the Roman Catholics, the CofE, and the CofW, because they think they're the only ones here.

It's a quaint idea, of course. But the idea of mansions in the sky stretches our imagination. Heaven never was a location on a map. It's beyond space and time, not even in outer space. And it's not all that comforting anyway. Moving house is one of the most stressful experiences. And we can barely get our minds around the idea that we relocate ourselves from terra firma to some other location beyond space. In fact, what we're given here is far richer and more reassuring.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled.' This is part of Jesus' farewell speech. At one level it is addressed to the disciples in the upper room. On another level it's addressed to Christ's followers living on the other side of his death and resurrection and ascension. And it answers the question: why did Jesus leave us? Why couldn't he have stayed around after the resurrection? That's not a question the disciples in the upper room would have asked. It is a concern for the believers who came later, including ourselves.

What might cause our hearts to be troubled? What might cause people to stop believing? John's immediate readers are a small church, facing suffering and

persecution, frightened at being left alone when Jesus is no longer there. It would also be the sense of the loss, absence of Christ, a feeling that we are on our own, abandoned, deserted, forgotten by God. It could be the continuing threat of terrorism; the victims of the wars in Jerusalem and Ukraine – any of the circumstances in our lives that undermine our faith and peace.

Jesus' departure and return to God after his death makes possible the return to us of Jesus' spiritual presence and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That would not be possible without the death and departure of Jesus. His crucifixion, although a staggering blow, is in fact a blessing. Jesus' return to his Father has made all the difference in the world. Not only has Jesus got a dwelling place with the Father, but the Father has a dwelling place in the Son. Father and Son mutually relate. 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.'

But, in departing, Jesus is preparing (not a spot in a physical dwelling but) a place in God's family, a place where one can be related to and remain with the Father as closely as Jesus, the Son. And the place that he prepares, the relationship that he opens up, is not something that only begins after we die. The preparation was the short interval between Jesus' departure and the coming of the Spirit of Jesus. We also have to prepare. It happens when we enter into a relationship with Jesus through his Spirit and in his family. What is required is belief in Jesus – not believing doctrines. More like trust. But it's deeper even than that. It's long-term solidarity with, abiding in, Jesus and in one another.

Thomas says they do not know where Jesus is going, so how can they know the way. He's thinking about travel directions and maps and destinations. But Jesus answers, 'I am the way.' You don't need directions to find me because I'm your destination. I am the truth. I don't have truths to share, because I embody truth. I am the life. I don't make provision for you to have life. Knowing me brings life because I and the Father are one. Now, what Jesus offers is not a physical place but a relational state. Not a house or mansion but a household – a community of people.

Heaven is not a place, but a relationship. We are not left alone, because the Spirit of Jesus is with us. He is not preparing a place; the place is prepared and we are invited to enter. And that's why St Peter can ascribe all God's dazzling blessings to his people: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.' And what is the reason for this relationship to Jesus, this incorporation into the Christian family? It is 'in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.

"Do you see the Light"?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen+