

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A

John 14.1-14

7 May 2023

St Luke's, Chelsea

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“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Let us stop there for a moment. What did you feel when you heard those words in today's gospel, the famous verse John 14.6? Perhaps it was hope. Jesus has, after all, just told the disciples that he will soon die. He is reassuring them that they do know how to be with him again – and, by extension, this is a promise that death is not the end for us. Not for nothing is this a gospel commonly read at funerals. Another option: perhaps you heard the words and thought: ‘I'm jolly glad I'm a Christian. Jesus is pretty clearly saying that you have to be a Christian to go to heaven.’ Or, a third option: perhaps you felt your neck muscles tense, and your heart beat a little faster. Is this text really saying that you have to be a Christian to go to heaven? Just how much violence against those of other faiths has been justified by this text? How can I reconcile this with the holiness I see in my Muslim neighbours? I don't like this way of thinking, you might be saying to yourself. But is there another way to read this verse?

It's on these words from our gospel that I want to focus today. I want to offer that other way, a hopeful account, which remembers that the gospel is good news for all people.

So let us step back for a moment from today's passage. If we could say that Christian faith had one core question, what would it be? For many who take John 14.6 as the bumper sticker summary of their faith – the ‘I'm jolly glad I'm a Christian’ response – the core question to which Christianity offers the answer is: ‘how can I be saved?’ And, in that line of thinking, in today's gospel Jesus gives us the answer. He is the way – we might have in mind the image of a narrow path – that gives us lowly humans the only possible way out of this sinful earth and up to heaven, to be with God the Father. But as well as being the path, this interpretation would say, Jesus is at the same time the gatekeeper who decides who gets to go up that path. And what you need to be let through is summed up – this interpretation would say – by John 3.16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ In other words, possess the right belief in Jesus, and you are being allowed on that single route that takes humans off our sinking earthly vessel and up to heaven.

I want to offer a different account of our faith. It is an account which begins from a different question, one that I think is more faithful to the Bible. That question comes in two parts.

The first part of that core question of faith is as follows: 'who is God?' And what is the creed that we will affirm together immediately after I sit down, other than the church's answer to this question? 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen...' and so on. And as that creed makes clear, we can't speak of who God is without telling the story of Jesus, God made flesh, who 'For us and for our salvation [...] came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.'

Three simple words. 'Who is God?' The second part of our new question, though, is a bit harder to frame so pithily. Perhaps I can give you my preferred option: 'Who is God, and what does that mean for us?' 'What does that mean for us?'. I could have said 'what does that mean for the whole of God's creation?' – which is perhaps technically the most accurate – but I fear it feels too broad. I could have said 'what does that mean for me?'. That speaks to our modern individualistic lives – the same self-focused dynamic our previous story of salvation depends on. But I prefer 'what does that mean for us?' After all, 'no man is an island'. Whether we speak of the Body of Christ or our shared human race, we are bound together with others.

'Who is God, and what does that mean for us?' I want to suggest that this is the main question of Christian faith. If Brian or I descend our pulpit steps without in some way responding to that question, we've failed in our preaching.

But in that preaching, or whenever any of us think about faith, we have to confront a pretty brutal truth about ourselves. We humans seem to have two directions of travel. Sometimes we seem to be pulled upwards, heavenwards: great acts of courage, selfless love, a bellyful of laughter, and the like. But sometimes we seem to be pulled downwards, into the mud and darkness, far from what we hope to be.

The Bible exhorts us, urges us, pleads for us to look up. It points out the ways that humans have wallowed in the mud and descended into darkness. But it also holds before us models of faithful living. The Bible's writers remind us over and over again how to love God, and to love our neighbour.

And it's as part of its insistence that God helps us to look up that the New Testament in particular offers us a very useful metaphor. That metaphor is as follows: salvation.

It's a metaphor chosen with good reason. The Greek word *soteria* quite literally means 'being made well' or 'being made safe'. Not for nothing do we call a healing ointment a 'salve'. And with those ideas of safety and health we can say a great deal about faith. When we speak about earthly healing, we might speak about something

that just affects us – a broken leg, say – or we might speak of the viruses and the like that mean whole communities need healing. In the same way, speak of salvation in church and we'll be speaking both of something that we all need as individuals, and of ways that our whole community needs to be transformed.

What's more, just like earthly healing, salvation is something that affects our past, present and future. Salvation is a future moment, like those marvellous promises in Revelation of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Salvation is a present moment, like the moments when Jesus heals someone, and declares that 'the kingdom of God has come among you' (eg Luke 11.14-23). And salvation is a moment that can heal the past, as Israel is called no longer to be caught up in its memories of exile.

And, finally, what is healing? Healing is becoming fully me. And salvation is much the same. Salvation is not some entry ticket to another state. Salvation is the work of entering into our full humanity, each in the individual ways in which we are called. That means living into the ways that we can worship well; that we can care for our planet; that we can play our part as the Body of Christ; that we can tend to our fellow humans; that we can care for ourselves. Salvation is, as the Bible puts it, the work of being 'in Christ', living into who God is, the God who we see in Jesus.

How, then, are we to read today's gospel, John 14? Jesus is warning his disciples of his impending death. But, he promises, they know now how to follow in his footsteps. For he and his Father are one – two persons of the one God. And in Jesus the disciples have seen who God truly is. If the disciples live as Jesus has taught them, they will continue to leave behind their wounds; they will become ever more fully themselves. They will be following in the way of Jesus, who as God is the truth and the life. They will be coming to God. They will know salvation. And so, as we follow in the footsteps of Christ, can we.

It's not easy to fit all this on a bumper sticker. But I do think this is important. Who is God, and what does that mean for us? As people who look to Christ for the character of God, as people who pray that God's Spirit may help us to be people of God, I hope that salvation is at work in us. But we see salvation throughout the world, in people of all faiths and none – we see salvation happening beyond the church – we see salvation where we see conflict calmed, people caring for one another, individuals filled with joy, the environment respected. For this is the way of God, the truth and the life. And as we and all people live this way, in the marvellous light of God, may God help us to do ever greater works, to God's praise and glory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This alludes to John 14.14. I could have said more about vv.11-14, but hopefully from the above something of the interpretation becomes clear. To believe in Jesus, or to ask 'in his name', is not merely an intellectual or verbal act, but something that involves our aligning of our whole selves to the way of Christ that I have laid out above. So, the promise that we will do 'greater works', and the

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promise of v.14, is to say that if the disciples (and we) live fully into the way that Christ has modelled for them, they will show even more of the kingdom of God than Jesus has shown in his short earthly ministry. To put the point as a question to us: Jesus has done great things in his ministry: what might the each of us do if we fully lived into that divine way?