

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Sunday 10th May 2020 – “In my Father’s house”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this Podcast. My name is Robin Allison, the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton’s Chalmers Memorial Church.

I hope you are managing at least well enough as these days of lockdown continue. Sometimes the days, at the moment, seem to blend in seamlessly with one another. Just the other day I sent an email around our Church elders on which I had made a mistake in a date that I had mentioned. When this was highlighted to me, I sent another email around with a correction to which one of my elders replied shortly afterwards that the original date sounded good enough – after all who knew what date it was just now!

It was kind of them to be so understanding but their response did highlight the fact that we are all having to find ways to fill our days... giving each passing day a purpose of its own – perhaps in doing something we’d meant to do for a long time but had put off... or making a special meal for a treat... or phoning someone we hadn’t been in touch with for a while... or reading a book that has been gathering dust on the bookshelf...

That seems to be at least one way to manage the days we are in.

For me, holding fast to our faith has also been important. In these days God is, I believe, especially close to us. He is journeying with us and that gives all our days a special meaning of their own.

Today, on this 5th Sunday of Easter we will be taking time to look at a very familiar passage from the 14th Chapter of John’s gospel in which Jesus sets our lives in the larger context of what we know as eternity in some famous words he spoke about Heaven itself.

C.S. Lewis in his book, the Problem of Pain, states that belief in Heaven is at the centre of our faith. Here’s what he writes: *“We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning Heaven. We are afraid of the jeer about “pie in the sky,” and of being told that we are trying to “escape from the duty of making a happy world here and now into dreams of a happy world elsewhere.” But either (he says) there is “pie in the sky” or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine (this belief) is woven into its whole fabric” ...*

We’ll come back to that in a moment, though. However, first of all, shall we pray?

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Lord God, in these days when the days seem to be merging one into another, we thank you for the reassurance that you are with us and that your love and care for us gives each of our days a special meaning and purpose.

We know that, Good Lord, because we have seen it in the life and witness of Jesus who took time with people... who listened to them... who called them to him... who healed the sick and forgave those who could not forgive themselves nor be forgiven by others.

That care and love that he has shown gives us hope for the present but also a reassurance for the things of eternity.

God of all eternity – God of our past... God of our present... God of our future – we seek you this day.

Forgive us, we pray, if we have lost sight, in the middle of our days about what each day can mean.

Forgive us if we have become impatient with others... annoyed or frustrated with the world around us.

We know you understand how we feel but, at the same time, we pray that you would daily draw us to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. We may have our questions, but we ask that you would enable us to trust in you.

God of the past, present and future be with us as we worship you and hear us as we bring these our prayers by further praying the words which Jesus has taught us to pray saying:

Our Father

Which art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – John 14 verses 1 to 14

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going.”

5 Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’

6 Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’

8 Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’

9 Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”?’

10 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on

the evidence of the works themselves. 12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Amen and may God add his blessing this reading from his Holy Word and to His name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Today, for some reason, the set lectionary readings take us back to an episode in Jesus' last days, to that final meal that he shares with his disciples.

If you're wondering why the reading for today – a mere matter of weeks after Easter Day – takes us back in time, then you won't be the first to ask such a question.

There are times when I wish I was a fly on the wall at the meeting, or more likely meetings, of those great minds who put together the readings that preachers could follow week by week... and occasionally I wish that not only was I a fly on the wall but also a fly with a megaphone that could shout out – *“hoi you lot – what's the big idea in sticking that Bible reading in here?”* or *“why did you pair that reading up with this one? I just don't get – you lot are too clever for your own good!”*.

At first sight, not all the readings we come across in the lectionary make an awful lot of sense, at least in terms of where they have been placed in the sequence of topics for preaching on.

Of course, at second glance the answer as to why this reading is placed on this week probably has something to do with the way in which this passage helps us to reflect on the purpose and meaning of Jesus' resurrection. Much of what Jesus says here only makes sense in the light of his resurrection...

We have, even with that answer, still not run out of issues that we must face head on.

One of which is, of course, the sheer familiarity of this reading or, at least our perception that this is a passage that we know well.

It's one which, over the years, I have probably used at the majority of funeral services that I have had the privilege to conduct. It's a pattern that I began to follow when the minister who supervised me during my final stages of ministry training commented to me that he always used this passage at funeral services. It wasn't, he said, just because it was expected, but also because he felt it said everything that really needed to be said at a Christian funeral service.

This association with funeral services also probably accounts for why we don't hear as many sermons about this passage as we might normally expect. We hear plenty of sermons on Good Samaritans and Prodigal Sons but sermons on Heaven are a rarer breed altogether.

Are preachers, myself included, prone to thinking that hearing this passage in a normal Sunday service setting could stir up raw emotions in our hearers?

Is that also why we don't sing certain hymns as much as we might – hymns like *“Abide with me”* – a hymn that is sheer poetry to read and yet which has become so chained to certain grief driven episodes in our lives when there is no real reason why we should not sing it at other times too.

Perhaps, it's time to think again.

If my supervising minister all those years ago was, and is right, there's much here that really needs to be heard and to be heard as often as it possibly can. Here, after all, is THE classic encapsulation of the gospel...

One final comment before we get to the text itself is that we are dealing here with some very powerful images, especially when it comes to Jesus' description of Heaven itself.

At verse 2 Jesus states, *"My Father's house has many rooms"* ... That's how the New International Version puts it.

The Authorised version states it in its more classical form – *"In my Father's house are many mansions"*

William Barclay puts a slightly different slant on the words in his own translation, *"There are many abiding-places in my Father's house"* ...

They are all slightly different versions of the same thing, bound together by that image of Heaven being comparable to a place in which we dwell in the sight of a heavenly Father.

For some that might sound a little bit cosy... a bit familiar... a bit like being invited to watch EastEnders in the Queens sitting room at Buckingham Palace – or maybe she prefers Coronation Street? Who knows? But you get the idea.

It's all a little incongruous.

Occupying a spare room in God's House?

Images are supposed to help make big ideas easier to approach.

Whilst helpful to some, however, there may be others for whom this image is not so helpful, or at least not so immediately helpful – especially at a time when our familiarity with our homes is being put to the ultimate test.

I love the settee in my Livingroom and since I got a new TV set at the start of lockdown, I am enjoying it too – but not even I, as I am sure you are too, could have imagined how much even things we love could perhaps become just a little bit too familiar.

As I was preparing these thoughts for today, I came across an article written by a Puerto Rican writer and preacher, who now teaches theology at Princeton Seminary in the States by the name of Eric Barreto.

As a child growing up, he says, his imagination – in the simplicity of his upbringing - was always fired up by the idea that Heaven looked a bit like Disneyland!

"When I was a child, (he writes) my vision of heaven was riddled with roller coasters and populated by Disney characters"

Now that he is, as it were, all grown up, he has come to understand that Heaven - to some in these days - might seem much more like an open border into a new land as they flee oppression and fear...

Just as much as we might add for ourselves that Heaven looks awfully like that plane back from a foreign land where the unsuspecting holiday maker has become stuck...

Or perhaps Heaven now looks like a wide open beach – the beach we are currently not supposed to walk on, at least if it's not in our own town or village...

Or is Heaven becoming a bit like that hillside path that the Mountain rescue teams have asked us to stay away from...?

Or, dare we even say it, is Heaven becoming more like a Supermarket where we don't have to swerve our way down the aisles to keep a social distance... or a chance to browse the shelves without the fear that we will be accused of, or feel we are timewasting – “*come on (we imagine ourselves hearing) one tin of beans is the same as another... what's all the fuss...!*” as we scuttle down the aisles picking up all the brands we didn't like and forgetting the one thing we meant to get but can't go back to get because that's our one shopping trip of the day over...!

If I were to say what Heaven looks like to me at the moment, it would simply be some answers... even some dates in the diary... that would be a good start... a sense of when things might just start turning that corner so that I know where I am going and how I am going to get there... so that I can start to plan and wonder about the next steps...

This feeling of being so in between things... paused by a virus driven remote control – it isn't easy...

We are all driven by different images of what at this time - at any time - Heaven looks like or feels like...

It could be all, or any of the things I have just mentioned but, in the end of the day, we still have this amazing image of Heaven being not only like a house – a mansion even – where there are an ever expanding number of rooms but that that house, or mansion, is also the dwelling place of God himself.

And, more to the point, Jesus himself makes this extraordinary claim at verses 2 and 3 of our reading that he himself goes now to prepare a place for them and that he will also be the means by which they will, one day, get there for themselves.

Folks, it's hard to overstate just how breathtakingly different all this is to the contemporary teachings of the time.

Not only is Jesus telling us that Heaven is like being in the presence of God but he is also making this quite amazing claim that he – that is Jesus – is so identified with God the Father that it is through him that we shall experience what this promise and assurance means.

Here Jesus clearly sets out his stall that He and the Father are one.

At verse 10 of our reading, in response to Philip's bemused request that Jesus show them the Father himself, Jesus pointedly asks “*Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me. The words I say to you (continues Jesus) I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father living in me, who is doing the work*” ...

You could read these words a thousand times and still have to re-read them to understand the full implications of what they are saying...

But that's ok, Isn't it...?

Indeed, if you are on the list of bemused folks then I'll be happy to join the queue with you...

This is, however, one of the unique claims of our faith...

No other faith makes such a claim that we will one day dwell in the very home where God dwells...

It's one of those beliefs that brings hope... and it's one of those hopes that keeps us trusting somehow that – in the grand scheme of things – God always has the good of his people and of his world in mind.

It is, after all, why Jesus came into our midst in the first place.

Closing prayer

Our loving Heavenly Father, we rejoice again in the way that the gospel message speaks not only the past nor just of the present but that it points to the future. Although none of us knows what truly lies ahead of us, we are confident that you are part of that journey.

As we draw this short time of worship to a close we want to spread our minds outside of the four walls of our homes... outside of the vicinity of our own sense of vision so that we might consider the needs of others.

We pray for those who are finding the days long and who are finding that they are missing the simplicity of human contact. Lord, we confess, we are all feeling like that just now and so we pray that you, in your gracious love, would help us to keep going... to stay the course reassured in the knowledge that the bonds of love that hold us together are as strong, if not stronger, in these days as ever they were.

We continue to pray for front line medical staff and the emergency services of whom we ask so much. In particular, we make special mention in our prayers too of those who work in care homes or who support people isolated in their own homes at this time. May you bless them with your compassion and love.

We also draw to mind those – the many – who have faced loss in these recent days, who are walking down a road that they did not expect to walk down at the moment. In their grief may something of the hope of eternity speak to them and lift their hearts to a new place.

And bless us we pray with your reassuring grace as we bring these our prayers in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Trust in God, and in God's son, Jesus Christ,

who is the way, the truth and the life,

and through whom we come to know the Father.

And may the blessing of God,

the grace of Jesus Christ,

and the presence of the Holy Spirit

go with you this day and every day.

Amen