

Homily: A roomy faith

About a week before the Level 4 lockdown began, Christine and I were able to tour the vicarage, soon to become our home. At that time the previous tenants were still in residence, so it was a relatively cursory and confusing look through the building: cursory because we were conscious of invading their space; confusing because of the way they chose to employ the various rooms available, making bedrooms of the spaces they could. We found that we came away with a difference of view about what we had seen. After several discussions, we settled on a shared idea of what we were going to.

It turned out that we had a faulty assumption and flawed imagining of what existed, so that now we have seen it this week, empty, we are having to revise our thoughts of what will go where and how we will use the space.

It will be fine, of course. My point in relating this little tale is that it is easy to come to John 14 with faulty assumptions and flawed imagining.

In response to what we may expect is perplexity and fear on the part of the disciples, who have just heard Jesus predict that he will be betrayed and that Peter will deny him three times (John 13:21-30), Jesus comforts them:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 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?... (John 14:1-2)

What do we imagine is the content of this promise?

For a many years I imagined it referred to the spaciousness of heaven and had mental pictures of clouds and angels playing harps etc, of dreams, peace, and endless rest. It seemed such a comforting image.

But on closer examination I've come to realise that this can't be what Jesus is talking about. He doesn't say "heaven has many rooms"; he says "my Father's house has many rooms".

The only other place that “my Father’s house” is used in the New Testament is when Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the Temple: “Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” he exclaims. (John 2:16)

(The one other place we might read the term is in Luke when the boy Jesus is missing and is then found to be within the Temple courts: ““Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). But in that passage “house” is implied rather than stated in the Greek).

So rather than talking about heaven as having many rooms, Jesus is talking about the Temple.

But now we may be more confused than ever. The Temple in Jerusalem was certainly a large and magnificent structure, but to talk of it if it were going to be turned into some kind of hotel or apartment block for all the faithful would be odd indeed. And if Jesus’ statement were understood in this kind of way it does not really answer to the disciples’ need for assurance in the challenging times that lie ahead. Furthermore, Jesus has pronounced judgement on the Temple’s practices (e.g. John 2:13-22) and prophesied its destruction (e.g. Mark 13:1-2). It seems contradictory then that he would then promise his disciples a future involving the Temple. What could Jesus mean then?

The key is to appreciate what the Temple was for, and thus what it represented. The Temple was the meeting place between God and humankind; it was the place where heaven and earth meet (heaven being God’s dimension of the created order, and earth being the dimension of space, time, and physicality we are familiar with).

To the confused and concerned disciples, Jesus uses the Temple as a metaphor for the new reality he is inaugurating through his dying and rising again; the new reality that will come in its fullness when he returns at the end of the age:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth”, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look!

God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5a)

Jesus is in himself, and is making available for others, the new place of meeting between heaven and earth. The assurance for the disciples, and for us, is that we will have a place in this new joined heaven-and-earth, this new creation.

There can be all kinds of circumstances that we need this kind of assurance, the assurance of the God who holds our future – we can say, with the Psalmist "my times are in your hands", and because of this we can also say "I trust in you O Lord" (Psalm 31:14-15).

Whenever I read these words I am transported back to a time when I did need assurance. On the day that our son Antony, our second child, was born, things were not going well: in essence he had got stuck in the womb, and we had to be transferred from Kenepuru Hospital to Wellington Women's for an emergency caesarean. Christine went with the midwife in the ambulance, and I had to travel along separately by car. I was scared and emotional, feeling helpless and alone.

With tears welling in my eyes – not the best while one is driving – I started to sing, in a quavering voice a simple chorus I knew well,

I trust in you, O Lord.

I say, "You are my God."

My times are in your hand ...

Choking up, I had to stop. "Sing it like you mean it!" I said to myself out loud.

And so I started again, more firmly,

I trust in you, O Lord.

I say, "You are my God."

My times are in your hand.

My times are in your hand.

and then more strongly into the second verse

Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown
his steadfast love to me,
his steadfast love to me.

The tears dried up, and the fear started to fall away. I felt more at peace: not knowing what lay ahead, but strengthened in the belief that somehow it was all in the Lord's hands.

Jesus presents this picture of a secure future for the disciples, "In my Father's house are many rooms; I go there to prepare a place for you." But the disciples are still anxious. "How can we find the way?" asks Thomas.

And Jesus replies with those famous words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Here again we often face faulty assumptions and flawed imagining. For many today are concerned that these words seem to be arrogant, intolerant, and exclusive.

And I'd agree that Jesus' words can be *employed* in an arrogant and intolerant way. It has been used by people trying to claim a religious superiority; it has been used to justify hateful violence; it has been used to avoid dialogue and careful listening to others.

But the claim in itself is neither arrogant nor intolerant.

It might help if I use an analogy. Some scientists argue that climate change is occurring and that it caused by human activity.

Other scientists argue that climate change is not occurring.

I use this analogy to make three points.

First, both sides can't be right: either man-made climate change is occurring or it is not.

Second, no-one thinks that it is arrogant or intolerant of either side to make its claims.

Third, eventually experience will show us which side is right.

Applying my analogy to Jesus' claim then:

First, both sides can't be right: either Jesus is the way, or he is not.

Second, it is not arrogant or intolerant of either side to make its claim.

Third, eventually experience will show us which side is right.

Finally, we need to remember that the one who makes this claim – this claim that seems to be exclusive – is *the One* whose intention is fully inclusive – the way is open to all who would accept it. This claim that is taken to be an abuse of power is made by the One who chose, not the way of power, but the way of humble suffering.

The Temple was constructed with very clear divisions and barriers between different groups of people: the separate courts for Gentiles, Jewish women, Jewish men, and priests. In a way the Temple itself could be a metaphor for exclusion. But in the work of Jesus we find a renewed Temple (or we could say, a “resurrected” Temple, in line with what I said two weeks ago). As Paul wrote of the divide between Gentile and Jew, “For he [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace...” (Ephesians 2:14-15)

But now comes the challenging bit: we are not only embraced by this inclusive work; we are also commissioned to be part of it. It is expressed in various ways throughout the New Testament. One expression is that of Saint Peter:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house... (1 Peter 2:4-5a)

A “spiritual house”: here’s the Temple again, and this time its *us*!

Peter goes on to write of the purpose of this:

... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house *to be a holy priesthood*, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ...
... you are a chosen people, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.
(1 Peter 2:5, 9-10)

The language of “royal priesthood” always makes me think of God’s original intention for humanity, that we would be both kings and priests: kings as under-rulers for God, ruling creation for its wellbeing (the image of shepherd kings comes to mind again) and to fulfil God’s purposes for it; and priests as representatives of humanity towards God directing the worship of creation toward its Creator, and representing the Creator to the rest of creation. This is what it means to bear the image of God.

Notice again that the intention is radically *inclusive*, not exclusive.

Earlier I mentioned in passing Luke 2:49 – the extraordinary statement by the boy Jesus: “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” – and noted that in the Greek the “house” bit is ambiguous. You may have noticed that some translations render the passage as “Didn’t you know I had to be about my Father’s business?” – although “business” is implied rather than express too.¹ The house word missing from the passage, but found in John 14:2 is *oikos*, and this word is the root for a number of related nouns that can refer to household, manager, steward, trustee; and related verbs about the activities associated with these. It is from this root that we get the word “economics”.

For me this prompts the thought that when Jesus comforts the disciples with “In my Father’s house there are many rooms”, he is also pointing to a future that involves an active role for the disciples and for us. To me Jesus might just as well be saying to the disciples, “In my Father’s business there are many roles”.

Frankly, as I think about the future, I take a great deal more comfort from the idea that when Christ returns I will have a *role to play and work to do* in the joined and renewed heaven-and-earth, than I do from ideas of sitting among fluffy clouds listlessly strumming my harp.

¹ For a brief discussion of the translation issues involved, see <https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/father%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Chouse%E2%80%9D-or-%E2%80%9Cbusiness%E2%80%9D-luke-2-49>. (Bill Mounce is the author of some of the standard courses on biblical Greek).