

In My Father's House

It is a family's worst nightmare. Birth is immanent. The mother is being carefully watched. The birth is expected within days,.....The Midwife raises a concern and the mother is admitted to hospital for urgent attention. Too late. Tragedy has struck. The baby has been lost.

The pall of gloom lowers itself on not just the mother and father together with the hospital team, but also on the extended family. Grand parents, uncles and aunties, cousins and siblings.

Whilst this was not my family, I was close enough into it, to able to call them to a time of pastoral reflection and prayer.

And so we gathered for prayer. Grief poured out. Prayers were offered. Scripture was read. And then, as I reflected on the situation for the family, there came a leap off point. Among the scriptures read was John 14:1-3. In my Father's house are many rooms. (Mansions)

As is so often the case when I begin to reflect on scripture, I found myself almost overwhelmed by some powerful imagery.

The first image came from the experience of being in this group. As we started to listen to scripture and prayed for the family, I realised that a profound change had taken place. What had been a disparate collection of family members, had now become a unified and gathered family, all reading from the same page. And further, they now embraced a palpable atmosphere that one could only describe as love.

I have always resisted poorly informed statements from people who might say;..... God did this! (When something bad happens.) I have never accepted that kind of theology; wanting to say instead, (when something bad happens) God does not **do** these things rather, when bad things happen, it is an opportunity for God's love to be seen and expressed. This grieving family had gone from being disparate and troubled, to being a gathered people through whom God's love would be poured into hearts of the young grieving mother and her husband.

The second image came from a vivid picture of 'the many rooms'. This is not the time and place to fully mine the thoughts of scholars who have the skills to do informed research, but a couple of thoughts are worth pondering.

Father Raymond Brown comes to say;

And so in using *many* (Mansions) John may be referring to places (or situations) where the disciples can dwell in peace by remaining with the Father (cf. 14:23). An interesting parallel to such a picture is found in a later work, Slavonic Enoch xli 2: "In the world to come ... there are many dwelling

places prepared for men, good for the good, evil for the evil.”¹

Saint Augustine, has another take on the ‘mansions’ when says;

But why have we this that follows, “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” but that they were also in fear about themselves? And therein they might have heard the words, “Let not your heart be troubled.” For, was there any of them that could be free from fear, when Peter, the most confident and forward of them all, was told, “The cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice”?²

And then a little further on;

Considering themselves, therefore, beginning with Peter, as destined to perish, they had cause to be troubled: but when they now hear, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you,” they are revived from their trouble, made certain and confident that after all the perils of temptations they shall dwell with Christ in the presence of God.³

These understandings are close to a commonly held view, especially in funeral environments. People seem to find assurance and comfort in these words.

Back into my vivid imagination (spiritual Visioning) in the context of this grieving family, a different image was emerging. In the here and now, a distant eschatology would not bring the same comfort that would spring from a realised eschatology. We have seen the image in which the various members of the family, were people through whom God’s love might flow. Now there appears a deeper insight.

Each of the family members, in their love for the young mother, not only poured out love toward her, but now, newly created within their individual beings, was space into which the young mother could now enter to find solace and peace. This extended family itself, had become the symbolic mansions into which the grieving mother could enter and rest.

Ross F Downes February 15 2022

¹ BROWN, R. E., The Gospel according to John (XIII-XXI): Introduction, translation, and notes

² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John”, St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies (ed. P. SCHAFF) (A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series; New York 1888) VII, 321.

³ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John”, St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies (ed. P. SCHAFF) (A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series; New York 1888) VII, 321.