



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 11, 2010
The Second Sunday of Easter

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
John 14:1-7
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IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

In this evening's gospel we have a famous and highly disputed sentence of Scripture: Jesus saying "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me." Many Christians quote this verse prominently and say that you must know Jesus if you wish to be saved, that if you don't believe in Jesus then when you die you will not go to heaven; Jesus is the only way to the Father, and so you must make some sort of act of faith in him or else, when your life is over, it's curtains. No heaven for you.

In reaction to this kind of argument, other Christians have asserted that there must be many ways to God, that we cannot know that Jesus is the only way, that we can see that manifestly there is a lot of good in other religions. This way of thinking is sometimes expressed as: *For Christians*, Jesus is the way of salvation, but for adherents of other religions God has provided other ways.

The problem with this second view is that it involves a flat contradiction of Scripture. Jesus says he is the Way, and he then says immediately that no one comes to the Father but by him. The plain meaning of this is that there are not many ways but one way, and that Jesus is that one way. I should put it plainly: anyone who tries to tell you there are many ways to God is not "thinking with" Holy Scripture. My desire as a priest and theologian, indeed as a human being, is to think with Scripture. I desire to understand how Jesus is the Way, yes, the exclusive Way. Yet you may well have sensed a problem with the first view I set forth. It does not seem right that coming to the Father should be a matter of getting the correct answer on the multiple-choice world religions exam. Shall we go back to the text?

In this evening's passage Jesus speaks of coming to the Father. He does so in answer to a question posed by our patron, Saint Thomas. Jesus has told them about the place he is going to (he is referring to his death and resurrection and ascension, his "hour") and that they know the way. Thomas says bluntly, we don't know where you're going and we don't know the way. Then Jesus: I am the way . . . no one comes to the Father but by me.

Where Jesus is going is his Father, and Jesus himself is the way to his Father. This is perplexing speech. Thomas is justified to be perplexed by it.

Yet it has profundity. Jesus began this speech by speaking to them of his Father's house; there, he said, there are many mansions (think: dwelling-places). But what is the Father's house?

Note that people on both sides of the dispute I mentioned at the beginning assume that the Father's house is a post-mortem destination at least for fortunate human beings. Are they right?

Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus went to the Jerusalem temple and with righteous anger cleansed it of impure activity. At that time he said: "you shall not make *my Father's house* a house of trade." This was offensive to the religious authorities, who challenged him about his actions. Jesus replied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The gospel-writer then states that by "temple" Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. So on Jesus lips, "my Father's house" means the temple, but the temple is his body, the body that died and rose from the dead.

If there are many dwelling-places in "my Father's house," does that mean there are many dwelling-places in Jesus himself, in his crucified and resurrected body? At the least, it certainly means that we cannot separate the house of the Father from Jesus' very person. So when Jesus says to Thomas "no one comes to the Father but by me," it is in a sense merely tautological: there is no Father who is out there, separate from Jesus; to go to the Father is exactly the same thing as to go to Jesus.

But what sense might there be in thinking of "dwelling-places" as being in Jesus? In chapter 8, John gives an account of some teaching and disputing that Jesus was involved in. One of the things he then said was that a slave does not have a permanent dwelling-place in the house, whereas the son does. So Jesus connects having a dwelling-place with being a son of the household. This is very helpful for us with our passage: the dwelling-places in the Father's house are for the sons and daughters of the house. If there are many such, then the Father's house has a great spaciousness. But to be a son or daughter of the Father is to be a brother or sister of Jesus. When Jesus gives the assurance to his disciples (and by extension to us) that there are many dwelling-places (mansions) in his Father's house, the penny drops when we realize, not that there is a place for us after we die, but that we are sons and daughters of the household. We are Jesus' brothers and sisters.

How does Jesus prepare a place for us in his Father's house, the house that is also his body? He does so—he has done so—by his death and resurrection and ascension, his "hour." By passing through death—really passing through it; not a fake dying, nor a near-death experience, not going to death and coming back, but going through death, through the pain, the dehydration, the abandonment, the torture, the suffocation, the cessation of heartbeat, the elimination of brainwave; becoming a body that achieves room temperature; closed into the darkness of the grave; and then the strangest thing in the universe, the gift of life, the gift of real life, a life that is in no way oriented towards decay and decline and death but oriented in a profoundly mysterious expansive way: this is the life that came upon the cold body of Jesus, his very corpse; a human life that is without end, expansive forever, a life that is true and is the way and is no way separate from the Father.

I expect that, for the rest of our lives, if we take Christianity seriously, we will be pondering how it is that (for me, for you, for each of us) Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Certainly there is much to explore here, and doubtless, with prayer and faithful persistence, we can come to appreciate this truth in more of its depths. But one thing we cannot say. We cannot say that Jesus is just one of many ways to God. For Jesus is God. Jesus' body is his Father's house. Going to the Father, the Way to the Father, whatever it means for all the billions of human beings who are alive and have lived and are to come, whatever it means it cannot mean anything apart from Jesus.

Well, there is one other thing it means—at least for me, and perhaps for you. It means that what I want most of all is not to go to the Father after I die. What I want most of all is to be a brother of Jesus. I want to find that dwelling-place even now.