

Easter 5A 2020 Sermon

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

It is the night before Jesus will be crucified. Jesus and his disciples have just finished the Last Supper, and Jesus has told them that he will be leaving them very shortly.

Imagine how the disciples must feel! For the last three years, their whole lives have been dedicated to following Jesus wherever he goes. And *now* Jesus tells them that he is leaving them! What will they do? Where will they go? What does the future hold for them, now that their accustomed way of living, and the deep sense of meaning they have been deriving *from* that way of living, is being taken away from them? Thomas speaks for his fellow disciples when he says to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

My friends, in many ways, we find ourselves in a similar situation today. Our accustomed ways of living and relating to one another have been taken away from us, for how long, we don't know; maybe forever. We're not sure what the future is going to look like. We are now living (some more consciously than others) in a subliminal state of fear. This virus is so unpredictable, so capricious! Some people can contract the virus and show **no** symptoms whatsoever; while for others, it is *deadly*: filling up their lungs with fluid so they can't breathe, spawning blood clots that cause strokes or heart attacks or loss of limbs, directly attacking the brain, liver, kidneys, or other organs, such that even those who survive the virus may do so with permanent organ damage. This invisible virus

attacks mostly the elderly and those with underlying health conditions; and yet we are finding that it can also cause fatal illnesses in young adults and healthy children. When, on those rare occasions, we **do** venture out of our houses, we don't know whether any of those persons we see at the store or doctor's office might be, unknowingly, a carrier of the virus, and therefore, a threat to our very lives.

And, added to this threat to our *health* is the threat to our economy. On Friday, the Labor Department reported that 20.5 million jobs were lost *last month*, causing the jobless rate to soar to 14.7% — the highest level since the Great Depression.

Now, I don't have to tell you that we human beings often don't handle very well living in a state of uncertainty, *unknowing*, and not being in control. And so I *understand* why some people want to **rush** to get back to "normal" – to get back to what they *know*, get back to a sense of certainty and stability, get back to being in *some* semblance of "control" over their lives.

But, if we are honest, the fact of the matter is, the *reality* is, that we **are** living in a state of *uncertainty*, *unknowing*, and **not** being in control. The question is: Can we live with trust in God amidst that reality? Can we hear Jesus' words in today's Gospel being said to us: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me."

It's not the first time that our world has experienced such upheaval, such uncertainty about the future. In March of 1918, the novelist Marcel Proust described the effect that living through the First World War was having on him. He wrote: "Just as people used to live in God, so I live in the war."¹ Just as people used to live in God, so I live in the war.

University of Toronto professor Christopher Brittain "compares the location of one's existence within an all-encompassing context to inhabiting a 'sphere'" within which "our individual lives are interrelated and contained within a shared environment... We are enveloped — together — in a common sphere of being. [In 1918, Marcel Proust and perhaps a majority of the world inhabited the sphere of World War I.]

"Now, in the wake of COVID-19, modern culture's celebration of individualism and freedom of choice have run headlong into the [undeniable] **fact** that the isolated person relies upon a web of relationships for one's very existence. The present appreciation expressed towards health-care workers, as well as for the employees of grocery stores, highlights the new-found sense of dependency on others that many are now recognizing — some for the first time..." Professor Brittain continues: "As... countries begin to relax their lockdowns, it remains unclear whether the shock of the pandemic will result in actual social and cultural change, *or* the pre-virus order will simply re-establish itself... This is a

question of what kind of ‘sphere’ we will inhabit as our societies slowly emerge from the clutches of the pandemic...”² (unquote)

My friends, after this pandemic is over, whenever that is, will you and I, and the rest of society, **keep** the sense which we *all* have now – that grocery store clerks, Walmart employees, and health care workers at all levels are worthy of our deepest appreciation and thanks? Will we *continue* to think of them as **essential** workers – *profoundly* essential to our very survival, health, and the well-being of society, as is so clear to us now? Or will they fade back into the woodwork for us, their work and their very being no longer even noticed? Will “our heightened awareness of our collective vulnerability and dependence upon each other” create a **new** sphere for our world to inhabit *after* the pandemic? A sphere of coexistence wherein our identities are defined by who each of us truly is *in God* and in God’s kingdom, rather than our *recently*-inhabited sphere of polarization and discord, wherein our identities have been fabricated by political, national, and other such *transitory* affiliations which will dissolve with our deaths?

I think this is what Jesus is speaking about in today’s Gospel with the metaphor of his Father’s house which has plentiful dwelling places – room for all. Jesus already dwells in his Father’s house, for he lives in the Father and the Father lives in him (as he says later in today’s reading). But he is going to prepare a place in this house for his disciples, a sphere in which love of God and neighbor reign supreme. And what Jesus is saying when he tells his disciples “you *know* the way to the place where I am going” is that God’s abode is already, and ever has been, in the depths of our soul, though we have shut that part of us out of our awareness and consciousness, so consumed are we with the outward, materialistic and contentious sphere which we have been inhabiting for so long.

And it is not just us and our present society. When Philip asks Jesus, “Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied,” he, too, is inhabiting an outward, materialistic sphere. He wants to see God with his physical eyes, the eyes of the flesh. But Jesus says, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen *me* has seen the *Father*.” Philip does not see God in the physical body of Jesus – just as you and I so often fail to see Christ in every human being (though we promise in our baptism to do so). Philip – and often, you and I – inhabit a sphere where the material world *is* reality. But reality for Jesus is so much **more**; and it is *that* sphere, which is God’s house of plenteous rooms, which Jesus is going to prepare for his disciples (which includes you and me).

My friends, at this time of uncertainty, not knowing, and not being in control, when the sphere of existence in which we **have** been living is experiencing a veritable earthquake, and we truly *do not know* what churches, or restaurants, or sporting events, or gyms, or hair salons, or anything else is going to look like in the future, at this *precious* time, we have a rare, divine opportunity to inhabit a **new** sphere of common existence. It will not be easy; no change of habits and

mindsets and lifestyles and prejudices and affiliations ever is. It will take patience, and it will take intentionality. But, my friends, this new sphere of existence already exists; we need only to enter into it. Jesus calls it, “the kingdom of God.” And that kingdom is what Jesus *never* stopped talking about, never stopped trying to describe, never stopped inviting us into. It is just another way of describing that house in which Jesus has always lived, with his Father, in the loving unity of the Spirit; that house of plenteous rooms – *one* of which is yours. And what you will find when you do come to that room which Jesus has prepared for you is that that room has always existed, in the depths of your heart.

“Just as people used to live in God, so I live in the war,” Marcel Proust said. What will *we* say? “Just as people used to live in God, so we live in the COVID pandemic?” Or do we have the faith, the hope, the trust to say, “Just as people used to live in God, so will we, once more.”

AMEN

1 “The shape of our new lives: Hope and interdependence in a post-pandemic world,” Christopher Brittain, Posted Tue 28 Apr 2020, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Religion and Ethics Portal, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/hope-and-interdependence-in-a-post-pandemic-world/12195292?j=1318907&sfmc_sub=90118763&l=125_HTML&u=35536458&mid=7296852&jb=5&utm_source=sfmc&utm_medium=email&utm_content=&utm_campaign=%5bspecialist_sfmc_04_05_20_religion%5d%3a125&user_id=86138d1c1b75c5a8aee6e120fd0c4c821814186f5feb30c29b63c68285c7531&WT.tsrc=email&WT.mc_id=Email%7c%5bspecialist_sfmc_04_05_20_religion%5d%7c125story_3_headline

2 *ibid.*