

John 14:1–12

¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. ² In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. ⁴ Where (I) am going you know the way.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” ⁸ Philip said to him, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves. ¹² Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.

Context

The gospel text is part of a larger section which includes the Last Supper and all that takes place after Jesus had washed the disciples feet, after Judas has left the table (“*he took the morsel and left at once. And it was night*” (13:30)), and after Peter’s protestations he would never betray Jesus. The section comes before the disciples see their master led away for trial; then be condemned to death on a cross. Their faith will be sorely tested. Jesus’ teaching, beginning in 14:1, was given to strengthen for the hours, days, months and years to come.

O’Day suggests a broad outline of the context for our reading¹:

- The Farewell Meal (13:1-38)
- The Farewell Discourse (14:1-16:33)
- The Farewell Prayer (17:1-26)

There are several discourses in the Gospel according to John, however, this one is different. Where the others generally follow an event and serve to explain the event (e.g., John 5,6 or 9), the Farewell Discourse is one given in anticipation of the Passion, Death and Resurrection. It is thus interesting that in its liturgical use, while Jesus is preparing the disciples for the events of the three days (*triduum*) – in our time it is after the celebration of the *Triduum*. But that is not unusual even in biblical times.

One of the great discourses/speeches of the OT is the book of Deuteronomy, especially the farewell discourse by Moses to the people of Israel on the plains of Moab. The book of Deuteronomy reached its final written form during the Babylonian Exile period when Israel was asking itself the deep questions of identity, place and purpose. It is that context that Moses’ farewell speech receives a fresh hearing by new ears, in a new time and place. These words spoken long ago before the event of entering the promised land, are later heard in a new moment by a new people – even centuries after the event. Just as the people of exile were invited to see themselves on the plains of Moab, so too, in our day, we are invited to see ourselves in the Upper Room. We are reminded what is ours to do in proclamation of the Good News of the risen Christ. It is in this vein that the Johannine discourse is offered by the Church for our consideration on the 5th Sunday in Easter.

¹ John 14:15-21 is the gospel for the 6th Sunday in Easter; John 17:1-12 is the gospel for the 7th Sunday in Easter. In the United States the Solemnity of the Ascension is most often transferred to the 7th Sunday.

Commentary

The opening words of the gospel are straight forward: “*Do not let your hearts be troubled*” (14:1). These same words will be repeated in v.27 when Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will accompany them after Jesus returns to the Father.

Do not let your hearts be troubled

Though deeply troubled by the prospect of his own betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus concerned himself with his disciples’ distress. He said to them, *Do not let your hearts be troubled* [tarassō]. *You have faith in God; have faith also in me.* Their faith in God, and in particular their faith in Jesus, would enable them to calm their hearts as they faced what lay ahead. There are some scholars who argue that the expression in the Greek is in the imperative, something we would more naturally translate as “Stop being troubled.” It seems that in either case Jesus is not talking to trouble-free people and telling them not to *begin* to worry. Jesus knows he is talking to people whose hearts are far from serene.

Yet that advice is not one that Jesus always to take for himself. In John 11:33 (*taraxen*); 12:27 (*tetarakthē*); and 13:21 (*eterachthē*) we are told that Jesus is troubled (from the same root *tarassō*; shaken, moved). If at times Jesus had a troubled “soul” or “spirit,” how would we expect not to have troubled hearts? The answer has not been clear to Christians of every age. Perhaps our faith is weaker than we think; or doubts greater – because what we do know is that from time to time our hearts are troubled. Although the language could be more explicit, the context seems to lend itself to an understanding that the issue is that one can focus on the cause and source of what troubles you, or one can focus on the reason for trust that it will all work out. “Sure, you’re troubled, but remain calm.”

If we look at the three instances when Jesus was “troubled,” it has been noted that in each instance Jesus is confronted by the power of death. On our best days, we, who live on this side of the Resurrection, are comforted by the witness of Jesus’ resurrection. We know that ultimately death has no power over the believer. As the poet John Donne wrote: “Death be not proud, thought some have called thee mighty, thou art not so....one short sleep past and we wake eternally. And death, poor death, thou shalt die.” Death may well trouble us on any given day, but on the many other days Jesus’ words remind us that he is with us even when we are shaken, moved or troubled – so remain calm.

Believe into God

The second part of v.1 is actually quite difficult to translate for a number of reasons. The verb root *pisteuō* can be translated validly as “believe” or “trust” or “have faith” [EDNT 3:91]. But, the tense of the verb form used, *pisteuete*, is not clear – it could be indicative (present tense) or imperative (command like). Given that the verb is used twice in the verse, one is left to ask, which verb tense did the author intend. Or is there a mixing of the tenses? Opting for the root translation of “trust,” which of the four alternatives makes sense to you?

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| (1) “trust in God, trust also in me”, | imperative, imperative |
| (2) “you trust in God, trust also in me”, | indicative, imperative |
| (3) “you trust in God, you also trust in me”, or | indicative, indicative |
| (4) “trust in God, you also trust in me” | imperative, indicative |

Perhaps interestingly (perhaps not), two Catholic translations (NAB and NJB) opt for alternative (2); while three popular Reformed translations (NSRV, NIV, ESV) opt for alternative (1). In a context where Jesus was urging his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, any translation [(1) or (2)] which urges them to maintain their trust in Jesus is most appropriate. It does not matter much whether that is prefaced with an exhortation to trust God or with a reminder that they did trust God.

But interestingly, none of the above translations opt to translate *eis* as “into.” The word *eis* always carries the sense of movement in or toward, and thus older translations often had the unique Johannine

phrase, “believe into me.” Malina and Rohrbaugh (230) note: “John’s peculiar way of phrasing it – believing ‘into’ Jesus – connotes being completely embedded in the group of which he is the central personage.” Earlier, (130, commenting on 6:28-29) they had written more about this concept:

Believing “into” is a characteristic Johannine idiom. Many commentators have pointed out that this construction implies trust rather than simple intellectual assent. Given the collectivist character of the relationships in ancient Mediterranean societies, however, even more is implied. Collectivist persons become embedded in one another. A unity and loyalty is involved that is extremely deep. Since personal identity in collectivist cultures is always the result of the groups in which one is embedded, that too is involved. John’s peculiar idiom (the Greek tense used connotes ongoing or continuous action) suggests exactly this kind of long-term solidarity with Jesus.

There is something to this idea – which is perhaps why the Apostles and Nicene Creeds were written “we believe” as opposed to “I believe.” (At this point some might be thinking, “then why does the current Roman Missal use “I believe.” The short answer is that in the liturgical setting of the Mass, the Creed’s use is an affirmation of one’s baptismal vows and thus is appropriate to change the original text to the first person singular. But when witnessing, the original context of the Creed’s formulation, “we believe” remains the appropriate language.)

In my Father’s House ² *In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?* ³ *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be*

Verse 2 also has some translation options: “*In my Father’s house [oikia] there are many dwelling places [monai].*” Should *oikia* be translated “house,” i.e., a physical structure (as in 11:31 & 12:3); “household,” i.e., a community of people (as in 4:53 & 8:35)?; or even “family” – all of which are valid translations [EDNT 2:495]. Often people immediately think of the King James’ translation: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” – which immediately moves one thoughts and reference to heaven. Is this the intention of this passage?

If one is convinced that *house* [oikia] refers to heaven alone (v.2) then the *prepare a place* (v.2) and the *where I am* (v.3) refer to a place in heaven where Jesus is. The *I will come back* speaks to the parousia – although that is not a topic the Gospel speaks about elsewhere. But clearly *oikia* has other meanings: household, community, family. If one lends credence to those understandings, then the reference can be heaven and earthly life.

Some of this should sound familiar to those who would study the Gospel According to John. The encounter with Nicodemus (ch. 3) and the Samaritan Woman at the well (ch. 4) hinge of the ambiguity of words. And there is more. The same ambiguity exists with *monē* (singular). It means a “place where one may remain or dwell,” It can mean a physical structure – and often in secular use it refers to a transient or overnight lodging [TDNT 4:574] – rather than the fixed “mansions” of the KJ translation.

Then again, all the focus on the “where” might be a diversion from the more important element. Many argue that here in v.2 the context (because of v.3) lends itself to a permanent dwelling – but is it physical? The only other NT use of *monē* is John 14:23, “*Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling [monē] with him.*” The use there seems to imply an abiding relationship between people and God – and one in which the Father and the Son come to the human person!

This noun is related to the verb *menō* meaning “to remain, stay, await” [EDNT 2:407]. The verb occurs often in the Farewell Discourse (14:10, 17, 25; 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 16) most often referring to the relationship between God and Jesus or God and us. Another reference with this meaning of *menō* is

8:35 (where *oikia* also occurs): “A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son always remains.” Do the words “remain” and “house” refer to a physical place or to a relational state? Our children remain our children forever, even though they may not be living in our house. The relationship remains even while the physical presence may not.

Fr. Raymond Brown (627) writes:

This special house or household where the son has a permanent dwelling place suggests a union with the Father reserved for Jesus the Son and for all those who are begotten as God’s children by the Spirit that Jesus gives. Thus there would be some precedent for reinterpreting “many dwelling places in my Father’s house” parabolically as possibilities for permanent union (*mone/meno*) with the Father in and through Jesus.

Why mention all this? Jewish traditions that identify the 'Father's house' with a heavenly dwelling place clearly lie behind the imagery of v. 2a (e.g., Pss 2:4; 66:1; 113:5-6; 123:1; Is 66:1), but it is critical to the interpretation of Jesus' words in this gospel that “*my Father's house*” not be taken as a synonym for heaven. This needs to be read first in the context of the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus, a form of indwelling that has been repeatedly stressed from the opening verses of the Gospel (e.g., 1:1, 18). And that indwelling is the critical relationship for the disciples in the post-Resurrection era.

I will come back again...and show you the way

Jesus’ coming back (v.3) has been variously interpreted:

- his coming to the disciples following his resurrection (cf. 20:19–29);
- his coming in the person of the Holy Spirit (cf. 14:15–21);
- his second coming at the end of this age (cf. 14:28; 21:22–23; *parousia*); and
- his ‘coming’ to take his disciples to be with him when they die. (This suggestion, comforting though it is to think of Christ ‘coming’ for us when we die, is not something that receives any support in this passage.)

Many commentaries opt for the second coming/*parousia* understanding, but what does one then do with the tension between such a view of vv.2-3 and the realized eschatology of the rest of the chapter? Eschatology is the study of the end things. The “realized” modifier speaks to the “end things” unfold in time such some have happened already while others lay ahead. A little too simplified, but it will do for an explanation.

For example, the thought in vv.15-17 (also 16:7) is that Jesus comes back to the believer in and through the Paraclete who dwells in the Christian. What does one do with the thought in v.23 (only other NT use of *mone*) that Jesus and the Father shall make their dwelling place in the Christian? Do we have to pick one vs. the other? Is there a way in which both understandings are present?

Fr. Raymond Brown insists that there are elements both of final (in the end) and of realized (now) eschatology in John and that they can be found even in contiguous passages (vv.19-25, 26-30). Yet some commentators find it difficult to think that two such different pictures of heavenly dwelling with Jesus and of earthly divine indwelling could have been put side by side in John 14 as promises of how the disciples would be consoled after Jesus’ departure without some attempt at reconciliation or harmonization. It is obvious from our discussion that the phraseology of vss. 2-3 did not originally refer to Jesus’ return in the form of indwelling, but could the phraseology have been secondarily reinterpreted to make it harmonious with the indwelling theme of the rest of the chapter?

Fr. Brown proposed a possible understanding to that end by integrating this early part of John 14 into the over-all Johannine theology of the chapter. Jesus’ return after the resurrection would be for the

purpose of taking the disciples into union with himself and with the Father, without any stress that the union is in heaven. In the Greek of v.3, Jesus says literally, *“I will come back again and take you to myself.”* If, as Brown suggests, this continues the relational element of Father-Jesus-us, then by his death, resurrection, and ascension Jesus is to make possible a union of the disciples with his Father. Thus he must prepare his disciples for the union by making them understand how it is to be achieved. Augustine (*In Jo.* 118: 2) expresses this cleverly: “He prepares the dwelling places by preparing those who are to dwell in them.” Thus, vs. 4 seeks to involve the disciples, as Jesus assures them that they know the way to where he himself is going (to the Father, because they know Jesus). But just as “the Jews” of 7:35 and 8:22 could not understand where Jesus was going, neither can Thomas (v.5). To answer, Jesus must now explain clearly that he is going to the Father and that he represents the way to get to the Father (vs. 6) – to be in union with God.

I am the Way

In vv.6-11 we have the explanation the disciples seek. In v.6 there is a shift from the “where” (as in , *“where you are going”* – to the way to get there (*“how can we know the way”*). In response to this shift Jesus says *“I am the way and the truth and the life.”* This statement contains the sixth of seven ‘I am’ sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Fundamental to Jesus’ response to Thomas’ question was that Jesus himself is the way (and in this context that Jesus is the truth and the life seem to be supporting statements).

Within Judaism, “the way” denotes the life-styles of the “wise” – those who live in accordance with the teachings of the sages (Prov 28:2,20). In the Psalms the “way” describes a life lived in accordance with the will and desire of God. Within this context, O’Day makes two interesting notes on these verses:

This is the heart of the good news for the Fourth Evangelist, that in Jesus, the incarnate word, the Son of God, one can see and know God in a manner never before possible. (743)

In many ways, John 14:6 is both truism and tautology, because, following John 1:18, it is indeed only through the incarnation that the identity of God as Father is revealed. John 14:6 is not a general metaphysical statement about ‘God’; Jesus does not say ‘No one comes to God except through me,’ but ‘No one comes to the Father except through me,’ and the specificity of that theological nomenclature needs to be taken seriously. John 14:6 is the very concrete and specific affirmation of a faith community about the God who is known to them because of the incarnation. . . . ‘God’ is not a generic deity here; God is the One whom the disciples come to recognize in the life and death of Jesus. When Jesus says ‘no one,’ he means ‘none of you.’ In John 14:6, then, Jesus defines God for his disciples; the Fourth Evangelist defines God for the members of his faith community. (744)

Did that last quote give you pause? O’Day’s assertion that “*no one*” means “none of you” is only that – an assertion. The expression in Greek (*oudeis*) in fact means “no one” or “nothing” [EDNT 2:541] and is rather absolute in use and meaning. Also given the larger theological context of John 14 (as pointed out above by Fr. Brown), the context is not as simple as revealing only one “aspect” of God, namely God as Father. The relation is highly Trinitarian and thus points to the fullness of God.

O’Day goes on to assert that these verses (vv.6-7) are simply a joyous affirmation of a particular religious community, in a particular place and time in history, and was the means of defining themselves – who are in fact a minority within their own time and place. She asks the question of the verse *“No one comes to the Father except through me”*: is this a firm ontological statement that admits of no exceptions – e.g., a 21st century Muslim would find a different way to God, but not to the Father – or is it simply a statement of what we Christians believe?

This topic is called the “scandal of particularism.” In short, the scandal (that which causes people to stumble) is stated as: Would God really have uniquely picked Israel, and its fulfillment in Christianity, as the one and only particular way to achieve salvation? Some answer – “for Christians, yes; for others, who knows?” The Catholic Church proclaims Christ as the sole and unique savior for all and strongly rejects any idea that Christ is one among many others – i.e., the Church rejects, Jesus for Christians and some other person/name for others faiths. Since 2006 at least three catholic theologians have been censured for writing texts that the Church authorities held to espouse another doctrinal position.

Show us the Father

Jesus statement in v.7 is cast in the light of a deep human desire: to see and know God. Jesus tells the disciples – in knowing me, in seeing me, in my words, and in my deeds, you have seen and come to know the Father. But Phillip is essentially asking for a theophany (v.8) – the visible manifestation of God – which raises the question of Phillip’s understanding of who Jesus really is. What comes next in Jesus’ reply is somewhat obscured by the translation of singular/plural second person pronouns, i.e., “you.” While not clear in English it is quite clear in Greek. Brian Stoffregen offers this clarifying paraphrase (vv.10-11):

"For such a long time I have been with **y'all**
and **you** have not known me, Philip?
The one having seen me has seen the father.
How are **you** saying, 'Show us the father?'
Do **you** not believe that I am in the father and the father is in me?
The words which I am saying to **y'all** I am not speaking from myself,
but the father dwelling in me is doing his works.
[**Y'all**] Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me;
but if not, [**y'all**] believe through the works themselves."

While this might indicate a lack of understanding and belief on the part of the disciples about the person and being of Jesus, it clearly shows their lack of understanding about the relationship between Jesus and God as Father. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand he was not just a prophet, not just a teacher, not just their disciple-master, not only the Messiah; he was the Word made flesh, God incarnate. To be in his presence was to be in the presence of the Father. And if you can't do that on a personal level – then believe the works.

Greater Works than These

To know what this means we need first to understand what is meant by ‘the works’ of Jesus. This expression is used repeatedly in connection with Jesus’ ministry, and denotes (1) evangelizing the Samaritan woman (4:34); (2) healing the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:20; 7:21); (3) healing the man born blind (9:3, 4); (4) Jesus’ miracles generally (7:3; 10:25, 32, 33, 37, 38; 14:11, 12; 15:24); (5) Jesus’ teaching (10); and (6) Jesus’ entire ministry generally (5:36; 17:4).

But what does it mean to do greater works than Jesus did? The word *meizona* does not mean greater in quantity, but is reserved as a qualitative assessment. No credible scholars hold that the disciples will later, in mission, perform works of a greater quality...however understood. Nor do they hold that the disciples/their works would more clearly reveal the Father. How are our works greater than Jesus'? Maybe it is as simple as the fact that our works come after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension – when Jesus has gone to the Father. The disciples work/ our works come during the new, eschatological age ushered in by Jesus' "hour" of glory when those later works reveal the complete story of the Word made Flesh and hence the fullness of God's love. By doing what Jesus does, the

disciples of every age continue the glorification of God through Jesus that was the purpose of his own works (v.13; cf 5:44; 11:4; 17:4)

Notes

John 14:1 *your hearts*: The command to not be troubled is confusing because “your” is plural, but “heart” is singular. Some translations (NSRV) eliminate the problem and translate as “hearts.” The odd Greek phrasing has led some commentators to speculate if John has in mind a “corporate heart” indicating a strong unity of the believing community.

***You have faith*:** could also be imperative: “Have faith.” This is only one of four possible translations of Jesus’ words. The two words translated ‘trust’ (*pisteuete*) could be construed either as indicatives or imperatives, yielding one of the following four translations: (1) ‘trust in God; trust also in me’; (2) ‘you trust in God; trust also in me’; (3) ‘you trust in God; you also trust in me’; (4) ‘trust in God; you also trust in me’. While the third and fourth translations do not make good sense in the context, either the first or second translations make quite good sense. In a context where Jesus was urging his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, it is one of the translations which urges them to maintain their trust in him that is most appropriate. It does not matter much whether that is prefaced with an exhortation to trust God or with a reminder that they did trust God.

John 14:3 *Come back again*: a rare Johannine reference to the parousia; cf 1 John 2:28.

John 14:4 *the way*: here, of Jesus himself; also a designation of Christianity in Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22. The word “way” (*hodos*) carries the same variability of meanings: a road, geographical direction, the means to get somewhere, obtain something, etc.

John 14:6 *the truth and the life*: He is also the way to God because he is the truth: he brought the truth of God into the world (1:14, 17; 8:32, 40, 45–46; 14:6; 18:37), proclaiming it and embodying it. Therefore, when people come to Jesus, they come to the one in whom the truth about the Father is found. Jesus is also the way to the Father because he is the life. In various ways the Fourth Gospel speaks of Jesus as ‘the life’. In 1:4 we are told, ‘In him was life, and that life was the light of men,’ and in 5:26 Jesus says, ‘as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself’. In 6:33, 35, 48, 51 Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘bread of life’, and in 11:25 he says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’ All these texts reflect the fact that the life of God was found in Jesus. Therefore, when people come to Jesus they come to the one in whom the life of the Father is found, and in this sense also Jesus is the way to the Father.

John 14:7: An alternative reading, “*If you knew me, then you would have known my Father also,*” would be a rebuke, as in John 8:19.

John 14:8 *Show us the Father*: Philip is pictured asking for a theophany like Exodus 24:9-10; 33:18.

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