

May 3rd 2026

10.30am Holy Communion All Saints Oakham

Acts 7.55-e, 1 Peter 2.2-10, John 14.1-14

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Today's gospel reading is perhaps the passage I have preached on most often over the years, as it is one of those most frequently chosen for funerals, for obvious reasons. At funerals, the message is very simple – a reassurance that Jesus has prepared places in heaven for those who follow him, and there is no reason to be troubled – and I usually talk for about two or three minutes. But today, I fear, the sermon will be rather longer as this passage is perhaps one of the most dense in terms of ideas and concepts in the whole of the New Testament and needs a bit of unpacking.

But first some context. The conversation between Jesus and his disciples takes place after what has come to be known as the Last Supper. John's gospel highlights Jesus washing his disciples feet rather than the eating of the meal, and his commandment that they love and serve one another. The disciples were almost certainly in a state of apprehension at what was going to happen, perhaps feeling sick in their stomach with fear. Judas had left them for some reason, unknown to the disciples if not to Jesus, and we are told, in chilling terms "It was night" – a dark, difficult and frightening time. And in the verses just before our reading starts, Peter asks "Lord, where are you going", to which Jesus replies that they can't follow him now, but they will in the future. This leads to Jesus predicting that even Peter would deny him and fall away. A quite shocking prophecy for those listening.

Our reading then follows, with Jesus' words of comfort. Despite it all, do not let your hearts be troubled, followed by the famous promise that he goes to prepare a place for them, and that in his Father's house there are many dwelling places. The Greek word here is *monai*, which was translated into the Latin *mansio*, from which of course we get the word mansions that is in the King James version of the bible. Mansions is not really an adequate translation and the word means a dwelling or lodging place, a place to stay, somewhere in God's abode, somewhere in the presence of God. *Mansio* was the word used by the Romans to describe a lodging place on the Roman Road network, a place to rest and recuperate before continuing the journey. There was one such at Godmanchester near Huntingdon. And there is something of that meaning in the text. Jesus has prepared places for us to stay in God's house, or God's kingdom or whatever you care to call it, but our journey continues in some sense even beyond the grave from *mansio* to *mansio*, lodging place to lodging place. In the final book of the Narnia series, the Pevensie children are urged by their heavenly companions to come "*further up and further in*". Jesus has opened the way to heaven through his death and calls us to follow, but our journey doesn't end there. It is part of our continuing eternal journey ever deeper into God's presence.

Then in our reading, as so often, it becomes clear that the disciples don't really know what Jesus is going on about. Thomas says

Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way.

To which Jesus answers with one of the most consequential phrases in the whole of the New Testament.

I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.

This single phrase is packed with myriad Old Testament concepts. It is one of the "I am" sayings of Jesus, which contains a deliberate echo of the divine name, Yahweh – *I am what I am, or I will be what I will be*. A usage that provoked the religious authorities of the day into shouts of blasphemy. Then Jesus speaks of himself as "the way". In our modern subjective age, the notion that there is one right course to follow, one way, is profoundly counter cultural, and our society would have us believe that all ways of behaving are acceptable and equivalent. Indeed, perhaps the most common usage of the phrase is to say that someone or something is "getting in the way", stopping others going the way they want. Indeed it is a phrase I regularly throw at our dog, as he lies across a doorway I want to go through, or on the stairs that I want to climb, very often with an extra adjective thrown in. In the Old Testament though, we find, in very many places, that following the way of righteousness is contrasted with deviating from that way and following the path of the wicked. It is nicely summed up in the book of Proverbs

I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run, you will not stumble..... Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it; do not go on it; But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

In our gospel reading, Jesus takes this image of the way of God and asserts that he is THE Way, not just a way - the Way of righteousness, the way to follow to find God, the way of the Spirit. The prophet Isaiah wrote of the Spirit's prompting

And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'

For Jesus, the immediate way that he took was the Way of the Cross, the Via Dolorrosa, and there is no promise that following Jesus would be in any way easy. Our reading from Acts on Stephen's martyrdom illustrates that. But in the New Testament "The Way" became the description of the path that the early Christians followed. When we first read of Paul as he was persecuting the early church, we read that he

asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

For the early church then, and for us, Jesus shows us the way to God, through his teachings, and through how he lived and died.

Then Jesus claims to be the Truth, again, not a truth, but the Truth. The words for truth in John's gospel can mean a variety of things – on the one hand simply that something is true as opposed to being false, but on the other it implies the truth of how things are as they are, of why things are as they are, the source of all truth, the “Big Picture” truth if you wish. And this truth is revealed in the Jesus portrayed in the gospels. A little later in the conversation that evening, Jesus will say that he will send the Holy Spirit who will lead them into all Truth – the Truth about who Jesus is, the Truth about what he has done for us at Calvary, the Truth about his resurrection that has opened the way to heaven for us all. And a little further on in John's gospel we read the cynical words of Pilate “*What is truth*”. The eternal truth stood before him.

... oppressed, and ... afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter

Then we have “I am the life”. In the creed we will shortly acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the Lord, the giver of life. The life that Jesus gives through the Spirit is eternal life certainly but we always need reminding that that life begins now. Last week we heard the words of Jesus

I am come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.

The life that Jesus calls us to, a life following and serving God, begins in the here and now as his disciples and followers.

So Jesus through his Spirit, guides and leads us on his Way. Jesus; again through the Spirit, is the giver of the ultimate eternal Truth; and the Holy Spirit of Jesus is the giver of our abundant, eternal Life.

But back to the disciples. There isn't much evidence that they understood any of this at this stage and rather plaintively Philip asks

Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied

What did he expect? Perhaps something like the dramatic visions of God in the Old Testament – God speaking to Moses through the burning bush, where he revealed his divine name; God speaking to Moses and the people of Israel through the fire and smoke, the thunder and lightening of Mount Sinai; Isaiah's vision of God surrounded by the winged cherubim and seraphim; the strange visions of God in his throne chariot recounted by Ezekiel (which one might suspect resulted from a surfeit of mushrooms!) But Jesus then 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. 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.

So here we are - back to our series on the Nicene Creed of a month or so ago. We have already heard Jesus say he is the Way, the Truth and the Life – all mediated through the Holy Spirit. Here he says that he and the Father are one. These chapters are I think the strongest argument for the Trinity in scripture. But how do we understand all this? The creeds give us complicated verbal definitions of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit; some prefer to draw complicated diagrams that express the Oneness and the Threeness of God. I find it hard to relate to either of these. For me the best way of appreciating what the Trinity is can be found in pictorial / artistic form – such as the Rublev icon that you have before you. This shows the three angels of the Lord who visited Abraham, often taken as a vision of the Trinity, three very similar seated figures in peace and harmony with each other. They are seated in a circular composition, God the Father on the left, God the Son in the centre and God the Holy Spirit on the right, focussed on the cup of wine, perhaps representing the Eucharist. Indeed the profiles of the Father and Spirit form the shape of a cup. And importantly that circular composition draws the watcher into the centre of the picture, to share the life of the Trinity. For me this gives me a greater insight into the Trinitarian nature of God, than any number of complex words and phrases.

So what does this rather complex reading tell us. Firstly that Jesus is the Way, the way to God, and he shows us the way to live, We are kept on that way by the nudging of the Holy Spirit. Secondly that in him, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the Truth about the human condition, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, about God's plan of salvation through the cross. And thirdly that in Jesus we find the way to true abundant living.

But importantly that way is to be walked now, that truth is to be explored and appreciated now, that life is to be lived now. And the way continues beyond the grave, where we will appreciate the truth and the life in all their fullness. And even there the way continues, from *Mansio* to *Mansio*, further on and further in. And we find that way, through being drawn into the life of God the three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit through whatever way is meaningful for each one of us.

I end with some verses from J. R. R. Tolkien – verses written early in his life, but adapted to some extent for the Lord of the Rings. The Lord of the Rings is of course not scripture, but as Tolkien himself said, it is a profoundly Christian work in its cosmology and its ethos. And the poem, "The Road goes ever on", seems to me to capture something of the essence of the way that Jesus calls us to follow into the life of God, the way that extends to eternity, the way that is always new and full of surprises.

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,

And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

Still 'round the corner there may wait
A new road or secret gate;
And though I oft have passed them by,
A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
West of the Moon, East of the Sun.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen