

John 14.1-14

‘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.’

This section of John chapter 14 is my favourite reading for funerals. It offers us great comfort, reassuring us that we have a place with God after we die, and many, many people choose it for the funerals of their loved ones.

However, verse 6 has been used by some as a weapon, a way to exclude others from the promises of eternal life. This is the verse that says,

‘Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This verse has led some to state categorically that only Christians will be saved, meaning that those of other religions- or no religion- have no place in God’s kingdom. The verse may be used as ammunition in the battle for people’s souls, as Christians fervently and sincerely attempt to convert unbelievers.

After all, that’s what it says in the Bible: there it is, in black and white- or even red letters.

But this is a problem for those of us who believe that Jesus worked against such exclusion during his life, and find it hard to believe in a God of love who would condemn vast numbers of people to hell, or at least to God-less existence. How do we make sense of this? How do we reconcile what we know of Jesus’ life with what this verse appears to mean?

The answer to this and all the other questions we may have about what we read in the Bible is that it all depends on how you read the Bible. There are things we need to know before we start basing our faith on bits of the Bible we have heard in church or learnt in Sunday school or read in our Bible studies.

When you pick up a book, there are things you need to know before you read it, such as: is it a work of fiction or non-fiction? Is it a novel, a biography, a text-book, a collection of poetry or a cookbook? What do we know about the author or editor? These things are usually self-evident, and we hardly need to think about them. We can easily tell the difference between an autobiography, a medical journal and a crime novel. If I pick up a book of Shakespeare’s Sonnets I will read it differently to the way I’d read a gardening magazine.

It may be less obvious that we need to do something similar when we approach the books of the Bible. We can’t just dip into it at random and expect the word of God to leap out at us from the pages: it isn’t a magic book.

It contains books of various genres, including poetry, story, song, letter, history, and allegory. We need to know which of these we are reading, because if we treat the whole Bible as history or as poetry or whatever we are not doing justice to the rest.

We also need to have some understanding of the context in which the book was written, and ask ourselves: what was the community and culture like when this was written? What might the writer have wanted to say to his or her community?

Then- and only then- can we begin to think about what it might be saying to us in our context and to our community.

It makes sense really. After all, when I read Jane Austen, I need to remember that she was writing for and about a very different culture to that in which I live. Her society had a strict class structure, rules about manners and behaviour, and quite a different view of the world. In order to enjoy her stories I have to put aside my beliefs about the place of women in society, for instance.

I know that Jane Austen lived at a particular time in English history and this helps me to understand what she writes about.

When she wrote her books, some of Jane's ideas were quite revolutionary: she wrote strong female characters of independent thought. To us in 2020 her characters seem absolutely stifled by custom and a male-dominated world: but they would have appeared remarkably free to her contemporaries.

If we read the Bible through the lens of our own culture it may not say to us what the writers intended to say. We need somehow to put aside our unconscious assumptions and try to discover the original intention behind the texts.

How do we do this? I suggest we all need to be better educated about what the Bible has to say. For our faith to grow, so that we have an adult faith rather than a child-like belief, we need to read the scripture with understanding.

It is too important to take lightly; we cannot assume that what we have thought or believed since childhood is really the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The last two hundred years of biblical scholarship, including the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other documents, have given us understandings that were not available to Christians of the past. They did their best with what they had, and we must do our best with what we have now and not simply choose to ignore this evolving knowledge.

Now we come to John chapter 14 and those lovely, comforting words about heaven. Did Jesus actually say them?

The only answer is- we don't know. John's gospel was written many years after Jesus had died, and as we know it is quite different in many ways to the other three gospels. Does it matter if Jesus spoke these words or not?

Does it change anything if we conclude that these words were true for the community of Christians for whom the author wrote, and they are true for us today?

God speaks to us through scripture, through tradition and through the church. Our responsibility is, as it always has been, to seek to understand what God is saying to us today and to live our lives accordingly.

In case you are wondering, I do believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. The Greek word translated 'way' also means 'road'. It seems to me that people who live their lives in obedience to God, as they understand God, who are doing their best to love their neighbour- those people are on the road that is Jesus' way.

Whether they recognise the person of Jesus in this life will depend to a large extent on whether they know who he is, and that may depend on where they were born and what they were taught.

There are great treasures of truth and beauty to be discovered in the Bible if only we will take the time to explore with our hearts and our minds open.

The Lord be with you.