

What next

No matter how many times I turn to John 14, there's always something to find in it – there's hope, there's comfort and there's assurance. And there's also something to learn about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

At the beginning of John 14, Jesus is talking to his disciples, his friends. It's on the night he was going to be betrayed and arrested. Jesus knew what was going to happen to him, but he took the time to comfort and assure his disciples – “Do not let your hearts be troubled” he said. Effectively, “Don't worry.” But not in terms of forbidding them from worrying... but assuring them that they didn't need to worry.

And Jesus then looks to the future – the ‘what next?’

“My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?”

Jesus is going to prepare a place in his father's house – his father's kingdom – for his friends. For those who love him. There's space for all his friends. And taking that space is not conditional – not on doing good things or being a good person (whatever that might mean) or giving enough or praying enough or whatever.

What an assurance that is, particularly when we are grieving for a faithful person, or when we're contemplating our own mortality.

But Jesus gives us more than an assurance of a place, he says “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

Jesus tells us – promises us – that he will make sure that we get to the place he has prepared for us. I think that's as important an assurance as the assurance of a place.

It's not up to us to get there. As people's minds and memories fade, they might seem to forget Jesus, but we can be assured that Jesus will never forget them.

“I will come back”, says Jesus to us today, “and take you to be with me.”

He told the disciples “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

But they didn't seem to know, and the disciples often didn't understand straight away what Jesus was talking about, and we heard that Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

It was a good question. And it remains a good question for us today. Jesus is talking about something that is beyond our human experience.

Jesus answered Thomas, though, removing any confusion, and we heard that Jesus answered him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

This is the heart of the Christian faith. No one comes to God, except through Jesus. We have all gone astray (and I don't just mean us here, but all people), and been separated from God – and it is through Jesus, through his death on the cross and his resurrection, that provides the way back.

Jesus goes on to tell them, “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” Or as Jesus had said to them back in chapter 10 of John’s gospel “I and the Father are one.”

Again though, the disciples weren’t quite there yet. This time Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” (14:8)

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (14:9-10).

How do we know this is true? Well, in the first place we have Jesus’ resurrection. His resurrection showed truly that Jesus was the son of God. It is Jesus’ resurrection that shows us all that Jesus said is true. Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Cor 15:14).

But we also have confirmation of Jesus promise of a place in his Father’s house for those who turn to him in today’s reading from the book of Acts. It’s the culmination of the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

When the church began, the followers of Jesus shared all they had. They identified a need to provide food for widows and orphans – but the distribution was often uneven.

In order to save the apostles trying to solve that problem themselves, they called for seven faithful men to be elected as deacons to take over the food distribution. Amongst the seven, the only one described beyond their name was Stephen, who the book of Acts says, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

And as a deacon, that fulness continued, and not only did he help distribute the food to the widows and orphans, Luke says that Stephen, “...performed great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)

We don’t know what exactly those great wonders and signs were, but it seems that some people weren’t happy that Stephen was performing them, and some of the Jewish believers, those of the Synagogue of Freedmen, began to argue with him.

When those people didn’t get their way, they conspired against Stephen. Luke tells us “...they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” and that they “...stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin” (Acts 6:11-12)

Does that remind you of any other clash with the authorities?

Most of chapter 7 of Acts relates Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin, in which he eloquently and in detail told the story of God and people: from the covenant with Abraham, to saving the people from starvation through Joseph, to saving the people from slavery in Egypt through Moses, to David as king and Solomon building the temple.

And having told that story, he challenged the Sanhedrin – in the last few verses before today’s reading, “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did

not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 6:51-53)

This was, as you might expect, the last straw for the Sanhedrin, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at [Stephen]” (7:54)

But as we heard in the reading, their anger didn’t phase Stephen: “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” (7:55).

Stephen, dragged before Sanhedrin – the highest authority – was not scared. He had the assurance of Jesus’ words at the opening of John chapter 14: Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. Stephen believed in God. Stephen believed in Jesus. In the face of an angry, powerful authority, Stephen did not let his heart be troubled.

Authority seldom responds well to a challenge – and there Stephen was, utterly defenceless, but also absolutely assured, absolutely confident in his faith in Jesus.

And so, as Stephen shared his vision of heaven opened, and Jesus as the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God with them, they blocked their ears and yelled and rushed at him. And they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. This wasn’t the organised ritual execution of crucifixion that Jesus had suffered, this was mob rule. Grab a stone and hurl it at this man.

But, like Jesus before him – and there are so many parallels between the death of Stephen and the death of Jesus – like Jesus, Stephen prayed. Jesus had prayed “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”, and now Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”. Jesus had prayed “Forgive them Father, for they don’t know what they’re doing” and now Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”.

Stephen, of course, wasn’t there at the last supper – he hadn’t heard firsthand Jesus’ assurance of a place in his Father’s house. But he believed it. And I think his vision pre-empted his own experience of it.

There he was, thrown onto the ground outside the city, surrounded by people filled with hate and anger, picking up rocks and stones and hurling them with all the force they could muster... and he didn’t resist. He didn’t curse them. He prayed for them.

And we heard that he fell asleep. In the end his death was peaceful. In the midst of brutality and chaos, Stephen’s death was peaceful.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

In the modern hymn, “In Christ alone”, there’s a wonderful line that I keep coming back to “Till he returns, or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I stand.”

Stephen was called home. Stephen took up the place that Jesus had prepared for him in God’s house.

That’s how it can be for us, if we’ve turned to Jesus in faith. Jesus has prepared a place for us in his Father’s house, and not only that, he will make sure we get there – so we will be where he is.

The scriptures don’t give us much detail on ‘what’s next’, but they do assure us of the certainty of a place for us, and a saviour who will make sure that we get. Where we will be with Jesus, and

where, as John writes in the book of Revelation, “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:16-17)

Or as David concludes the 23rd Psalm, which can be true for all of us, “....I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Amen.