

Prayer

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels! Alleluia!

Christ our King is risen! Alleluia!

Exult, all creation! Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour! Alleluia!

Christ our King is risen! Alleluia!

Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!

Christ our King is risen! Alleluia!

Darkness vanishes forever! Christ dispels the darkness of our night! Alleluia!

Christ our King is risen! Alleluia!

Amen.¹

[John 14:1-14](#)

The effect of deaths from COVID-19 in the UK has been to double the national death rate. I am hearing stories of funeral directors whose phone doesn't stop ringing all through the night until 4 am. I am dealing with more funerals at present than I typically would in a hard winter. So a major part of my work at present might be what we call 'consolation'.

Jesus is engaged in consolation in our reading. He has just told his disciples that he is about to be betrayed to death, and when Peter says he will lay down his life to protect him, Jesus warns him that he will do nothing of the sort – he will instead deny him.

Out of love for shocked friends, Jesus offers these words of consolation. As I've often said at funerals, since Jesus knows what overwhelming suffering he is soon to endure, we might expect him to be thinking of himself. But no. He is concerned for his friends.

Now we are not in the same position as those first disciples, but nevertheless there are elements of hope and consolation for us too in these words of Jesus. Let's listen in and see what we can pick up.

I'm going to do that by picking out three of the best-known (and most difficult!) things Jesus says here.

Firstly, those familiar words from which we often take comfort at a funeral service:

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² 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? ³ 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. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.’

It’s this promise of a **place** to dwell with God and his Son. We normally associate this with death, and the promise of being with God for eternity.

Of course that’s true, but in John’s Gospel a lot of these promises for the future become at least partly fulfilled now, and that’s true of this promise. How so?

The Greek word translated ‘place’ here is *moné* (from which we get our word ‘monastery’). Essentially, it means a lodging place. Not a permanent abode, but a stop along the way. A *moné* isn’t a final destination. And it’s also the word Jesus uses a little later in this part of John’s Gospel to describe the way he and the Father will take up residence in the life of the disciple.

Jesus is pointing us to the fact that our ultimate hope of dwelling with God for eternity will begin to be fulfilled now. For by the Holy Spirit’s work, he and the Father will live in our lives in the present.

Yes, even Peter who has been told he will deny and desert Jesus will not be deserted by God. For all our failures and shattered good intentions, Jesus promises us a place where we shall know the divine presence. And that place is within our own lives.

Even in the isolation many people are currently facing with the pandemic, Jesus says to those who follow him that by the Spirit they will not be alone. Yes, of course we would like that presence to come covered in flesh and bones, and we miss our loved ones desperately at times, but the Holy Spirit is not limited by social distancing and can make the presence of God real to us.

Why don’t we ask him to make that unmistakable for us?

But how do we get to that lodging place? That’s where the **second** theme comes in:

⁵ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’

⁶ Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

There is a **way** to the lodging place with God, and that way is Jesus.

I think this has a twofold meaning:

One is that Jesus himself is the way to the Father, and yes, that's an exclusive claim. Ultimately, that will be why what he achieves at the Cross. And if we say, well Jesus, there are lots of ways to God, what we are effectively saying is, actually Jesus, you didn't need to go to the Cross. Your suffering was unnecessary.

The other is that, having said that Jesus is the way to the Father, and that we can't do it ourselves, there is nevertheless a responsibility we have. And that is to live in the way of Jesus. 'Way' isn't just about access: it's connected to the Jewish idea of *halakah*, where a way is not just about access but a way of life. After all, if we are living in the presence of God, then that relationship leads to a certain way of life.

How exactly is this consolation? One is to know that Jesus has got this. The relationship is in his gift, and he's not shy in offering it, especially after all it cost him.

Another is that – however challenging living the way of Jesus can be – we are still invited into it, despite our failures.

When Jesus says he is the way, he is offering grace: the grace that opens the way to the Father, and the grace to renew forgiveness and offer fresh opportunities to walk his way.

If we are conscious of ways in which we have failed him, then we can hear Jesus call us back to his way. He makes it possible.

A **place**, a **way**, and **thirdly** and finally, a **purpose**:

What does this way of Jesus that we live while lodging with him by the Spirit look like? He tells his disciples (and, by extension, us):

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Greater things? Than Jesus? Really? Now that *is* challenging and difficult!

And certainly, some Christians assume from this that we should continue regularly to see the miraculous and the amazing, as in Jesus' ministry. Or some will say that we should be seeing even more spectacular miracles. Still other Christians think that 'greater things' means greater in quantity, rather than quality. And others say, this was only meant for the apostles, it doesn't apply to us.

I found it helpful when someone pointed out that this isn't the only part of John's Gospel where the expression 'greater things' is used. It's used in John 1 when Nathanael marvels that Jesus knows all about him despite never having met him before, and Jesus says he will see greater things. And greater things in John 5 refers to the Father bringing resurrection and then Jesus bringing life to people.

I wouldn't rule out the idea of remarkable miracles, because surely God is still as active as ever, but I think Jesus is also encouraging us that when we lodge with God and walk in the way of Jesus, we shall bring people to that greatest of all miracles, when people are brought out of spiritual death to the risen life in Christ.

Isn't that remarkable? People who love Jesus but fail him and even deny him are given the purpose of calling others to dwell with him and walk in his way.

We may have messed God up big time. We may be wondering how on earth we might be of any use to him during this lockdown. But by the grace of God, Jesus renews in us our relationship, our lifestyle, and our purpose.²

Prayer

That we may rejoice in the resurrection,

Risen Christ, give us hope.

That we may know that you have conquered death,

Risen Christ, give us hope.

That we may know that you have triumphed over the grave,

Risen Christ, give us hope.

That those in doubt and despair may see your light,

Risen Christ, give us hope.

That those who are troubled in mind may know your peace,
Risen Christ, give us hope.

That those in pain and distress may know your presence,
Risen Christ, give us hope.

That those caring for the terminally ill may know your power,
Risen Christ, give us hope.

That those who mourn may discover the joy of life eternal,
Risen Christ, give us hope.

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,
that we may be strengthened and sustained
by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.³

Blessing

The God of hope, who brought again from the dead that great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ, fill you with all joy and peace in believing; and the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now and for ever.

Amen.

¹ David Adam, *The Rhythm of Life: Celtic Daily Prayer*; London: SPCK, 1996, p10.

² Once again, I have depended on Ian Paul for a lot of the background. This time, see his blog post <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-farewell-discourse-in-john-14/>

³ David Adam, *op. cit.*, p12f.