

SERMON PREACHED BY
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Isa. 30:15-21; Eph. 1:3-10; John 14:1-14

One of my grandson's favourite silly riddles is, 'What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?' Answer, 'Their middle name.' And if we were to ask, 'What do our Old Testament lesson, the Psalm and the Gospel have in common, the answer would be 'The Way.' The Psalm begins, 'Blessed are those that are undefiled in the way', the Old Testament lesson ends: "This is the way; walk in it" and right in the middle of the Gospel Jesus says, 'I am the Way', which follows on from him saying, 'I am the gate of the sheep.' To claim to be the way, as to claim to be the gate, is to claim to be the way through, the way through to the Father first and last, and, meanwhile, the way to live life on earth. No one, who believes that Jesus is the way, could ever agree that the end justifies the means. If Jesus is the way, then the way must be Jesus, in a life lived like his.

This is particularly important in an age of management by objectives, of goals and targets and of the bonuses, which depend on them. The trustees and staff of North Staffs Hospital were so focussed on attaining targets that they forgot that they were supposed to be caring for patients and curing them. Religious folk and institutions are not immune, either. In Jesus' day the scribes and Pharisees were so obsessed with tithing anise and cumin, that they forgot the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and truth. And we should ask ourselves in our day, what aspects of our life at St Thomas Becket are in danger of falling under the same condemnation.

It isn't enough to sit back and expect Pope Francis to recall the Vatican to a proper sense of priorities. We have to take a look at our own Church of England, its dioceses, parishes and chaplaincies. And we have to look at ourselves, too. One of the remarkable things about today's Gospel is the way in which Jesus keeps on switching between the second person singular (in old-fashioned English 'thou' and in German 'Du') and the second person plural ('You' and 'Sie'). Sometimes he is speaking directly to the person in front of him, Thomas or Philip. Sometimes he is addressing the whole group of disciples, as if they were an embryo church. In both cases, he is speaking to us through St John's Gospel, challenging us in our discipleship as individuals and as whole churches and congregations.

That said, we still need to look to the end and ask what that is. Here, the Epistle comes to our aid, for it speaks of what it calls 'the mystery of God's will', that is to say his purpose for the Church or, as it says, 'a plan for the fullness of time.' Sometimes people ask, 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'What is it all for?' Well, here is one answer, and it is a rather surprising one. No wonder no one ever thought of it before the coming of Christ, his death on the Cross and Resurrection to eternal life. It is 'to gather up all things in him, that is Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.' What can this possibly mean? Well, one thing is that it is not God's will that everything should keep falling apart, whether at the level of individual human relationships, or between the sexes, classes, nations and races, or in the economy and ecology, or at the level of humankind's relationship with the earth, our island home, or even at the level of the whole universe or, to use the biblical word, the cosmos.

We cannot envisage what 'gathering all things up in Christ' will be like, but the fact that it has been revealed to us as the end shows us the direction in which we should be moving along the way. Later in the same Epistle the Church is given the specific task of making this wise plan known to 'rulers and authorities.' (Eph 3, 10.) Our friends in the German Protestant Churches are rather good at this, especially but not only, in their Kirchentags. We have a lot to learn from them. Certainly, divided churches cannot speak credibly of God's purpose to unite all things in Jesus Christ; and we may be grateful for the advances, which have been made in our lifetime in Christian unity, not least in the Meissen and Porvoo Agreements between Anglicans and German and Scandinavian Lutherans, while recognising that much still remains to be done.

We draw strength and inspiration from what the Gospels tell us of the ministry of Jesus on earth, for example in the way in which he, a Jew, draws in the Greek gentiles, brought to him by Philip, whom, together with James, we celebrate today. We owe a lot to Philip, especially for his courage in blurting out the questions, which we and the other disciples want answering, but are too embarrassed to ask. It is to him and the other disciples that Jesus reveals the deepest of all mysteries, that 'I am in the Father and the Father in me' and it is to them and to us that he says that we will do greater works than his. Again, there is much for disciples yet to do.

But in our age it is impossible to envisage drawing all peoples, let alone all things, into unity without raising the question of other faiths. And yet, in response to Thomas' question about the way, Jesus says, 'No one comes to the Father except through me.' What are we to make of this? First, we have to ask what kind of a statement it is. It is not a general theological proposition about salvation and it is certainly not about damnation. Nor is it a knock-down argument to questions about other faiths, which had not then been put. Jesus knew nothing of Hinduism and Buddhism, and Islam had not yet been invented. This is, rather, one of those passages, which begins in the second person singular and ends in the second person plural; it is a mixture between a challenge and an invitation, directed to the heart of the hearer and hearers; and it is designed to elicit, not argument, but faith. St John says explicitly that his Gospel is written, 'so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' Two thousand years later that same question cum challenge is addressed to us. It is existential; it requires a response. In fact today, which marks the bi-centenary of the birth of the great Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, we might well say that it is existentialist. It is not proposed as a topic of conversation or designed to raise theoretical anxieties about the fate of those who have not so much as heard the name of Jesus. It offers us the chance to become what we should be by taking a decision, a positive decision for Christ, the Son of God, not a negative decision against anyone else.

Secondly and more importantly, it raises the question of the nature of the God to whom we pray as Father. Is this a unitary, totalitarian God, who makes arbitrary decisions about the ultimate destinies of men, women and children? Or is God a Spirit, whom we worship in spirit and in truth, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself a community or Trinity of Persons bound together by love, who hates nothing that he has made and of whom it is a property always to have mercy? Now, when I see the piety and devotion of, for example, my Muslim friends, I cannot doubt that they are approaching God, and that their prayers, if like ours they are acceptable, are taken by the Spirit to the Father through the Son, and that in this way they do indeed come to the Father through Him. It is along these lines, I believe, that we should heed the words of St John: 'This is his commandment, that we should believe in Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us.' Amen.