

PREPARING FOR THE HANDOVER

- How do we prepare for a future in which God does something that we cannot understand?
- We could look in a few different places, but I want to look at how Jesus prepared his disciples for it, so I'd like you to turn with me to John chapter 14 verses 1-14.

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

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

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

Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'

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. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. 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. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.'

- Jesus has already sent his disciples out on short adventures without him, but he's preparing them for a handover – he will return to heaven, and they will continue the mission without seeing him. They don't even quite understand that – they just understand that he's going away somewhere – so this helpfully speaks to “going into the unknown”.

THE DISCIPLES

- The Disciples are full of questions: Where are you going? How can we go there? What is God like?
- They're also full of fear, and as is often the case, they sometimes hide it under bravado: They fear being left alone; they fear not knowing how to complete what Jesus has told them to do; they fear that their hope in God might be misplaced.

JESUS

- Jesus really only says two things to them, and they're both things he's said before but he comes back to them
- We need to hear these same words

THE FOCUS – KNOW ME

- The first is – “know me”
 - I am the Way, the Truth, the Life
 - The ..., not A ...
 - Way – to God. The world offers lots of ways, but there's only one Way to know and be with God.
 - Truth – the world keeps changing its mind about things. We don't always see it, because we live in today's culture, but things that are now held up as truth, things which you will be shunned for disagreeing with, would

have been thought nonsense 20 years ago, and might well be thought nonsense in another 50 years. Jesus doesn't change his mind, and his words are utterly true. Devote yourself to knowing them!

- Life – there's only one thing worth living for. Jesus said, "seek first the Kingdom of God"
 - Doesn't mean that you lock yourself in a convent or a monastery
 - Doesn't mean jacking in work or studies or family
 - It means – make God your life goal, and see those other areas as arenas in which your life goal is worked out
- Matt 6 / Luke 12 – Sermon on the Mount & associated teaching
 - God has set us up for success. Not in everything, but in seeking the Kingdom.
 - What do I mean? He's given us all the groundwork, he's showed us what it can look like to live wholly for God, he's promised us that he'll *live in* us and guide us along the way, he's guaranteed the outcome – it's right here at the end of the book.
 - So we know where we are, we have all we need and a promise that that will go on being the case, and we're guaranteed to succeed. The Sermon on the Mount is full of these assurances: ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.
 - Jesus sums this up in a short passage in Luke 12:27-34

"Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'"

- God *has been pleased* to give us the Kingdom. Not grudgingly, picked for the team because we were the last person in the line-up. God is pleased for us to live for him now, learn to set our hearts on him, and then rule with him forever.

THE FEAR

- In both the passages we've read, Jesus names a really important obstacle to our knowing him and living for him alone – fear.
- "Do not worry about what you will eat or drink, or wear", "Do not be afraid, little flock", "Do not let your hearts be troubled", "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid".
- Primary school music teacher – terrified, assumed he was crusty, unkind, shouty – said as much to a friend and he was really surprised, said he was an absolute legend. I was too scared to actually speak to him, so I never found out what he was like. We can be like that with God – too scared of what he might be like to find out what he's actually like.
- Fear stops us pursuing our calling. In the Parable of the Talents, it's fear that makes the third servant hide his coin away – "what if I lose it and the master gets angry with me?" Fear of failure can paralyse us.
- Jesus addresses another fear we can have: "do not be afraid when people talk you down, or even slander you". We can be afraid of other people.
 - The most obvious is "out there", in the world. Jesus speaks about how non-believers might misunderstand or misrepresent us, and get us into trouble. Are you afraid of being distinctively Christian in your school? Among your friends? At work?
 - There's also the less obvious "in here" – in the church. Speaking with people who've grown up in Catholic settings, I've often heard the phrase "Catholic guilt". For all its many good sides, that wing of the church seems to have developed a strong "guilt culture". As evangelicals, I believe we have developed a strong "fear culture". Our history is one of continual splintering as one group disagreed with another, each branding the other heretical. For every courageous leader, church or movement taking forward the kingdom of God, there are numerous books, blogs, YouTube videos, websites, dedicated to explaining why they're heretical, unorthodox, liberal. We've got to rise above that critical culture which reinforces fear – and on the other side of things, we need to stop being afraid of what our brothers and sisters in Christ might think of us!

HOW CAN WE “STOP BEING AFRAID”?

- How is it that Jesus can tell us not to fear? Everybody knows that just saying “don’t be afraid” on its own doesn’t really achieve anything. Two reasons:
 - Imagine – you’re feeling really sick, your whole body seems to be shutting down, and a friend says to you, “don’t worry, it’s OK”. It probably doesn’t land. But if those same words are said by a doctor in a lab coat, you’ll almost certainly believe them and worry less. Their knowledge and their authority brings peace.
 - Jesus knows the future and has all authority – go to him for peace!
 - Imagine – you’re one of those on benefits in the US whose payments are likely to stop because Trump has refused to sign the Coronavirus Emergency bill. You’re deeply worried about whether you can afford to eat this week. One of your kids says, “don’t be afraid” – it won’t leave you feeling better. But what if someone knocks at your door and hands you a winning lottery ticket and says, “don’t be afraid”? That guaranteed success totally dwarfs the small change you were worrying about before.
 - God has promised us the Kingdom! When we really understand that, it doesn’t matter as much if we don’t have a successful career, if we carry an extra few pounds, if people around us think we’re a little bit strange, if people think our lives a bit of a failure – or maybe just don’t even think of us at all. We still have the Kingdom!

IN CLOSING

Jesus told the disciples all this, and at first they were still confused and afraid – but when the Holy Spirit came on them, these truths took root so deeply in their hearts that their attitudes and behaviour were utterly transformed. The same John who fled and deserted Jesus in Gethsemane wrote later on:

“Perfect love casts out all fear”

And Paul wrote:

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”