

In the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

The work of progressive theologian Carl Gregg was of great help in the layout and structure of this homily. Like many people, I have a long and complicated history with today's gospel. As a clergy person, the first connection I make with this passage is to funerals. It is hands down, the number #1, most popular gospel selection for Christian burial. But my involvement with this passage goes much further back! As a child and a young teen, going to church with the strong and faithful women in my family, I remember loving this passage, especially the image of the Father's house; a home where Jesus was preparing a room for me. It contributed so much to my sense that I was beloved, a child of God and destined because of God's grace and Jesus' gift to come to the best home ever at the end of my earthly life. I'm glad I had that. Security and love are such a huge part of any child's faith development.

Then I grew up some. And the passage began to be more problematic. I was still drawn to the "home" imagery, but began to hear more loudly some of the other overtones. I had accepted Jesus as in some way unique; the standard for my life. As I came to know him, he became the way home to God for me; he became the gate for this sheep, as last week's gospel told us. But I also began to hear an exclusivity in this gospel, in particular in verse 6. **"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."** I have always been a reader and consumer of spiritual writing from other faiths and could usually hear the voice of the God I knew in most of them. As my horizons widened, I came to know faithful men and women who practised these other faiths; good and holy Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others. And I found myself asking, is this passage saying that Jesus is the only way to heaven? And if is, do I accept that? What particularly defined my struggle was the number of times I experienced this text being used to end inter-religious dialogue and not to sustain it. Someone would ask sincerely if Christianity is the only way to salvation. And it would be discussed, at first in a benign manner. But at some point, someone in the group would always quote this text usually in a judgemental tone. *"The Bible says that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by him."* And all discussion shuts down. Doors close. Possibilities are lost. It's an extreme example of bashing someone with the Bible.

Carl Gregg notes that when people quote this passage in a bashing kind of way, they are actually missing two very important words in it. The text does not read, Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. Rather it reads: **“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”** Who is this him? It is Thomas, one of Jesus’ own close disciples. So immediately we know that this is an intra-group conversation; one taking place at the intimate level for those who know Jesus best. And Jesus is answering a question. He has told Thomas and the others that he is going away. They want to know where. He tells them that they already know the way to the place where he is going. And Thomas says, **“Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”** That’s the question Jesus is answering, clearly not a question like *“Are all non-Christians going to hell?”* For starters, those terms were not even on the radar of the first disciples. Jesus is here not talking about the rest of the world. He is comforting and encouraging those closest to him. That knowledge has been key for me in learning to deal with this text. Theologian Wesley Ariarajah has helped me immensely with this example, which I’ve tailored to myself. When my children were little, they would sometimes say, *“You’re the best Mommy in the world.”* Now factually, I knew that that was not true. And it is something that could not ever be measured anyway. Clearly, another little girl down the street thinks the same thing of her Mommy. But my child was speaking from her experience, speaking not the language of absolute truth but of faith and love. For her, being in relationship with me and only me as Mommy, her statement was as true as it could be. So it would be for Thomas. When he asks *“How can we know the way?”* Jesus offers himself as the answer. He offers himself in relationship. He offers himself to Thomas, a person who has already come to know him as the very best way to walk, the very best truth to discover, the very best life to live. Jesus invites Thomas and us, those who are already in relationship with him, to go further into an ever deepening relationship where we learn by doing. In effect he says, *“Be in me. Find yourself following my way, uncovering my truth, living my life.”* As Eugene Peterson, the translator of *The Message* has said, **“Only when we do the Jesus truth in the Jesus way do we get the Jesus life.”** There is a sense in which were we completely committed to that – we would be so involved in the beauty of imitating Jesus, that we

would have little time to worry about what those committed to other faiths are doing. That does not mean we have no care for them. It just means that we trust that their life is held in God's grace just as ours is. Had we read just a little further in our gospel for last week from John 10, we would have heard Jesus say, "**And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.**" Now I am not insisting that John 10:16 means that Christianity must be taken to be inclusive of other religions. We do not yet know how God plans to make one flock with one shepherd from the disparate spiritual traditions of human beings. Some things just are God's work. Suffice it to say that the inclusivity of John 10 should have at least as much weight with us as is often given to John 14's supposed exclusivity.

I still struggle sometimes with the way many Christians insist on interpreting John 14. But for me, this gospel is gradually becoming less and less problematic. I no longer hear it as a text that excludes those outside of the Christian faith. I no longer hear it as claiming that Christianity is the only way to salvation. I agree with Carl Gregg when he says that though for us Christianity holds sufficient truth for salvation, this does not mean that it has to hold it as exclusive truth. There is such a difference! I call to mind Huston Smith's pithy line, "*God is defined by Christ, not confined by him.*" Jesus says elsewhere in John's gospel, "**You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.**" When we realize that the truth is Jesus's way of living and not just a proposition about him on a page, we do experience a great freedom. What I hear in this gospel now is freeing for me. I hear Jesus talking to, for and about us who follow him. I hear him comforting us and strengthening us; reminding us that we know him and so we can know what to do next and always. And I hear him challenging all of us he's invited into his inner circle; those of us who claim to know and love him best. He's reminding us to ask ourselves: Am I living the Jesus way? Am I living the Jesus truth? Am I living the Jesus life? **Amen**