

SERMON- Easter 5 (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

Acts 7:55-60

1 Peter 2:2-10

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

May 7, 2023

Psalms 31:1-5, 15-16

John 14:1-14

OPENING:

Some math for you this morning:

There are some 31,102 verses in the Bible, and a rough estimate of how many deal with what happens to us after Resurrection comes to a little over 100. About one third of one percent of the Bible is about “heaven” and “hell.” Point. three. percent.¹

Perhaps our Gospel this morning can be included in that .3%.

This passage, which you might recognize from funeral services where it is often chosen as the Gospel reading, is where Jesus explains “what happens after we die.”

It's a good one for that because it has this remarkable image of Jesus going before us to prepare a place for us, and what's more, he promises to come back from there to guide us to that place.

There is a couple of issues here and the first is that, in the King James Version of this passage, what we just read as “dwelling places” is translated as “mansions.” These translation issues are what they are and my money is on our version being more accurate to the original text.

Safe to say that if you thought Jesus was being like Oprah:

You get a mansion

You get a mansion

You get a mansion

You are going to have to settle for a “dwelling place” instead.

The second, more important, issue is that line “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14.6) and the difficulty of hearing that.

What does that line mean? Who then makes the cut? Do all dogs go to heaven?

There are some churches, and some priests, where, at a funeral, if this passage is to be read, the last verse is taken out so it ends with “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life” instead of “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The reason being, of course, that Uncle Larry in the coffin might have had no relation with Jesus, or half the audience might be of another faith, or what have you.

¹ Sermon by the Reverend Sam Sheridan, Easter 5 (A) (Preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Petersburg, VA, March 30, 2023)

I would like to chew on all this this morning, what Jesus means by that phrase, and what it means for all of us as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling Perhaps some heavy lifting, but here we go.

GOSPEL:

“No one comes to the Father except through me” says Jesus, and we start to sweat. It's because it makes Jesus sound like a stingy gatekeeper casting non-Christians out into the darkness.

We can already hear people saying:

“there it is, he wrote it down right there, even you nice Episcopalians have to abide by this. Jesus says you are going to go to hell if you don't believe in him. No more Good Shepherd, no more everyone is invited to the table, no more Mr. Nice-Guy.”

To that, I would say “let's go ahead and read it literally: ‘No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Biblical ‘literalists’ seem to read it and hear “No one comes to the Father except through me” (with “me” becoming the “Church institution.”)

People read it “literally” and hear “no one comes to the Father, except through me...” so that ME becomes not Jesus

but, say, the fire & brimstone preacher who says you are going to hell, or ME: the culture warrior who cannot abide not being in control.

But, again, read literally, it says “No one comes to the Father except through me” (*open parenthesis* Jesus Christ the Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world *closed parenthesis*.)

Just take it at face value: “*No one comes to the Father except through the person who we say we trust and rely on.*”

Historically, Christianity, Christians of all shapes and sizes, even the disciples themselves have instead said: “We cannot trust Jesus to do that dirty work, we will handle it for you. Don't you worry, Jesus, we will volunteer as the enforcement mechanism.”

For some reason, we think we are really good at being the agents of God's exclusivity.

So, please, let us decide who actually is worthy of having a room, a dwelling place, a mansion, in your house.

We are engaged in this grand endeavor to somehow protect Jesus from the Weeds, from the goats, from the sinners, from this denomination or that denomination. Our preoccupation with this is so interesting given Scripture's lack of preoccupation with "the afterlife."

SHIFT

So what do we do?

Let's listen to Jesus who says:

"You don't understand earthly things, you won't understand heavenly things."²

There is an exclusive note: God gets to decide, we do not get to decide what happens to anybody after they die.

There is also an inclusive note in that Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life" NOT in the sense that he has posed a good example so that if you follow that, then you are in luck. You cannot possibly do that, Jesus is saying, but he is saying that he will both be there and he will bring you to there.

It actually has very little to do with us.

The emphasis is NOT on the place. But on the relationship, it's not about the size of sheepfold, or the dimensions of the gate, it's about the Shepherd who will be there for you.

In the meantime, and since it's impossible for us to really stop thinking about "heaven" and "hell" and what it might look like, here are just a few observations that I might offer:

The mansion thing comes from this idea that the afterlife will offer fulfilment of what life lacked. You get a mansion in heaven, instead of a trailer on earth; health there instead of illness here; strong relationships instead of broken ones, etc.

Heaven as fulfilment of what life lacked; the Bible never actually says, and that's indeed a great disappointment.

C.S. Lewis is helpful here: "If this is not true, (if it's not fulfillment of what life lacked) something better will be."

OR Sister Corita, talking about heaven: "The rules will be fair and there will be wonderful surprises."

Notice how I have to bring in the cavalry, C.S. Lewis, etc., because I don't know. So, One more, from Reinhold Niebuhr: "let's not spend too much time talking about the furniture in heaven, or the temperature in hell."³

² John 3.12

³ *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 2:294

CONCLUSION

So we have the Church, this beautifully flawed instrument, helping people find the way and the truth and the life, but oftentimes overstepping its authority. To be fair, it oversteps because it's been imbued with so much power from its author. Notice how Jesus says we will do greater works than Jesus'.

We had an example of this just yesterday and I will close with this.

This image of Charles III coronation as King of England, conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England. This incredibly beautiful ceremony, this important historical moment.

Much has been made about the comparison between Charles III and his predecessor, his mother, Elizabeth II, who was crowned in a much different time and was a much different person. Elizabeth II, a faithful Anglican, was crowned in 1953 at a time where the Church still at the center of society.

Then you have Charles III in 2023, the classic Baby Boomer, a divorcee and casual church-goer, who has expressed interested in multiple religious faiths. He is now reigning over a multicultural United Kingdom with a multicultural/ religiously plural world watching.

Charles III invited other faith leaders to his Coronation so that included include a coalition of religions in this important socio-political moment: Jewish, Sunni and Shia Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Bahá'í and Zoroastrian were all present in an unprecedented way.

Everyone was there: those groups, all the Church of England hierarchy, all the royals, the Prime Minister, Lionel Richie was there, Katy Perry was there, David and Victoria Beckham.

But then there was something about the anointing, this very private moment in the midst of this incredibly public ceremony. If you watched, the King takes off his robes and is stripped down to his very self, he goes behind this screen to be anointed alone. In that moment, with all the pomp and circumstance, with all of the monarchy's earthly power, with Charles sitting there with his goofy smile and his strange clothes. You wonder if he heard Jesus, the voice of the Good Shepherd and you wonder how he heard this line: "No one comes to the father except through me"⁴ **AMEN**

⁴ [Charles II Coronation Liturgy with Commentary May 6, 2023](#) page 17.