

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: John Chapter 14: Some Notes

One of those chapters which is obviously artificial. It is a continuation of Chapter 13 – almost mid sentence from one to the other. Chapter 14 is as rich as anything in this rich Gospel. You can read it at different levels, and in different ways – often with the different ways being added ways, not alternative ways. The opening promise is of room for everyone, of personal space, and perhaps of a progress in the next life. Narnia enthusiasts will recognise the higher up/further in of the after-death journey of the young people; and perhaps most of us rather like that idea. One moment now-life and next moment God in all His Glory is a bit intimidating; and change is an important part of pleasure.

Thomas is great. No “Yes, I understand” when he really doesn’t; and his down to earth comment gets from Jesus that most powerful of promises: Jesus as WAY (ROAD), TRUTH and LIFE. Then Philip joins Thomas. Some of the Old Testament key figures had got pretty close to “seeing” God: they had in their own individual ways had very close encounters – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel... However, it was a basic Jewish belief, perhaps strengthened by years of prophetic silence, that you couldn’t see the fullness of God and live. Arguably, Jesus doesn’t contradict that belief. We know, as Philip and Thomas didn’t, that God’s Creation is to be reckoned not in thousands of miles and thousands of years, but in billions of miles and years; so we would probably side with the disciples in reckoning that physically seeing the Creator is a bit outside our terms of reference. What Jesus is saying is that we, who haven’t physically seen Jesus (or indeed got any paintings or photos), can see what God is like, and how God works, when we look at Jesus. Savour the story of the child drawing God (no doubt an old man with beard), attracting the rather daft objection from the teacher that “Nobody knows what God looks like!”; and responding “Well they do now!”

In returning to the advice to look at Jesus’ signs/miracles/works, Jesus is doing more than urging the disciples to base their theology on their experience of Him, He is underlining His core message: this is what God does.

The next bit about Christians doing more than Jesus, and about Christians always having their prayers answered, takes a bit of thinking through. Note, by the way, that the emphasis is on Christians collectively – though that doesn’t exclude the rather isolated Christian who feels that there aren’t, in physical terms, any other Christians to be collective with.

Whatever may or may not have happened in some places at some time, most of us are not going to do one better than Jesus in raising the physically dead to physical life. But Jesus didn’t travel very far. His followers have taken the Gospel to (almost) every part of the world. Christian doctors and nurses and researchers have brought healing and enhanced health and hope to millions more than Jesus touched personally. And the prayer promise? God always listens to prayer, and in His way and in His time uses and blesses those prayers that are in line with His loving purposes. As we all know, we don’t always get what we want and ask for.

Jesus was very conscious that his little team was now going to be a team without a captain, a class without a teacher, a choir without a director; and that they still had a lot to learn – indeed in some ways they couldn't complete the learning process (if it can ever be completed) while He was still around. So He promised the Spirit as companion, guide, advocate, comforter. (The Bayeux Tapestry shows Bishop Odo prodding his troops with a spear, and carries the description "Bishop Odo comforts his troops") It is intriguing that this passage says both that Jesus will still be with them, and that the Spirit will take His place. It also talks both about on-going support and about the Second Coming – with some uncertainty as to which references are to resurrection appearances, and which to the Second Coming. I guess that the Spirit/Jesus presence is bound to be described in this way, because however we struggle to put into words the Trinitarian truth, you can't have in your life just one of those Three Persons. They come as a package! Note that Jesus identifies His followers by their obedience to Him (their copying of Him), rather than by their theology.

This Chapter always raises the issue of other religions and no religion. If Jesus is the only Way to God, the only Truth about God, and the only full expression of the Life of God, are non-Christians shut out? The "Church" in its various guises has often tended to tack onto this the promise that the Holy Spirit will guide Jesus followers into further truth/all truth, and so to argue that if you aren't part of the Spirit-inspired Anglican or Roman or Orthodox or Whatever Church, you are an outsider. Again C S Lewis provides a better way of looking at things. If Jesus is the reality of God, the devout Jew or Moslem or Hindu or atheist is one day going to encounter God in Jesus (and be accepted). Being a Baptised Anglican may well help, but we don't have a monopoly on God!

Incidentally, but vitally important, Chapter 14 is saying that being a Christian is a continually learning and continually serving experience. If you reach the point of saying "I know it all" and "I've done it all", you are kidding yourself!