

High St Uniting Church Frankston
John 14: 1 - 14

Abiding with God



Over the years I have done a number of funerals and once or twice we have used today's reading from John, the many rooms in the Father's house. It is a very comforting image for people; there is a place with God, a room or a dwelling place or a mansion in the Authorised Bible. A house in heaven where we will have a home.

This idea of mansions even went through popular music in generations past, such as this one from Pete Seeger.

Sing "My Father's Mansion"

Years ago, I bought a new house for my sons and I to move to. I had the luxury of still owning the house we were living in, so I had time to do some painting and decorating – the colour tastes of the previous owner were not my colour tastes. I did the work to prepare a place for us to go to. So, is that what Jesus is talking about here? Going to be with God and prepare a place for us to be there with Him, like some cosmic version of the Block? John must have known that people would get such a mistaken idea about this metaphor from Jesus, because he shows Thomas' misunderstanding with the question "how do we know the way?" And Jesus answers "I am the way." What we have in our Bibles as room, or mansion, or even dwelling place, is not a geographic or architectural term, it's a metaphor for a relationship – to be part of the household of God. Just as the Way describes a faith journey not a real journey, so Jesus' preparation of a place is not about a well decorated room in heaven but bringing about the reconciliation that leads to a relationship with God, here and now as part of the community that is the house of God with Jesus Christ.



These chapters of John – 13 through 17 – are termed the Farewell Discourse; Jesus saying goodbye to the disciples. It could be quickly summed up as "I am going to die and leave you but don't be distressed, it's not the end but a great new beginning." Knowing that vision of the whole section helps us to see what John is presenting in these words of Jesus and dialogues with the disciples. There is an intention to these metaphors, they are not isolated teachings to be taken at face value on

their own terms but part of a longer discourse. A discourse that spirals and intersects as ideas are introduced and developed. The foot washing at the opening of the section can be seen as the symbolic welcome to the 'house of God', that leads to the metaphor about the Father's house and the rooms which moves the idea to the community as the dwelling place of God. Then that idea of dwelling or abiding takes on a bigger meaning in the parable of the vine in chapter 15 – we abide in Christ and so remain in the house of God and the presence of God. So, you see this whole section hangs together and individual passages need to look to the whole to obtain their intended meaning. The passage today does much

of the work of summarising the whole section – “Don't be troubled, my going prepares a place for you to be the people of God and, through faith and the presence of the Spirit, you will not only get by but do even greater work for God than I did.” The place that Jesus is talking about is abiding in relationship with God the Father; dwelling in the house of God which is the community of faith.

Now maybe some of you think I've surged on a bit quick here. Jesus is talking about being 'the way' and how he is the only way to the Father, and the vine parable is about abiding in Christ, how does that translate into many different dwelling places being built into a community. For that step let's go back to who Jesus is talking to, and who John is writing to. The disciples were not just one group, they were also individuals and after the beginnings of the church they all separated to their own ministries in different places; they all abided differently. Hearing Jesus say “in my Father's house there are many places to abide or dwell” would have been an encouragement to exercise the different ways that they understood Jesus and God and the different talents that they had. John was writing to a community, one of many communities scattered throughout the Middle East and Western Asia at that time. They knew they were not the only followers of “The Way” at that time and would have been encouraged to know that there are “many places to abide or dwell”, not just the many communities but also the many differences in their understandings and gifts. The metaphor speaks of a diverse, living community bound together in faith and the Spirit to be a dwelling place for themselves and for the Triune God of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The use of this passage at funerals is understandable but may be mistaken; our faith is about living for God here and now as much, if not more, than it is about living in hope of a heaven to come. We talk about being saved a lot in the church, but that is as much about being saved for as it is about being saved from. Saved for ministry and living, in and through the community of faith. Both the metaphor in John of the many dwelling places, and the metaphor in Peter of living stones, speak of activity and purpose and individual usefulness and not just relaxed, casual membership. Jesus' death and resurrection opened the way for us to be the image and incarnation of God on earth, to take up the role that Jesus lived in his time in Galilee and Judea; he made the place available for us and invited us to take it up in the strength of the Spirit and to do great works in the name of God. Our task is not to sit back and look forward to a place in heaven, but to find our part of the house, our individual place of abiding in relationship with God, here and now. And collectively share those relationships as the house of God. The house of God that is the community of faith in and through Jesus, the house of love and service and refuge and blessing. We each have a part to play in the earthly house of God that we have been built into.