

Sermon for Sunday 19th July 2020 - Making our home with the Messiah

Cashmere Presbyterian Church - Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: John 14: 1-7

Introduction

What happens to us when we die? It is one of the big existential questions – how did it all begin? Why are we here? Where do we go when we die?

Over the years I have been in ministry this has been a constant topic of pastoral conversation. For example, I recently took a funeral of someone I had known for many years. He had greeted me at another funeral about a year ago with the question, straight up and without introductory small talk, “do you believe in life after death, Hamish?” To which I replied, “Yes I do. What about you?” He told me that he didn’t think there was life after death, and that as he was in his last years of life he had been reading lots of theology pondering this, and his considered opinion was that there was no afterlife! When I came to do his funeral I pondered as well, “how can I do the bit about committing this person to God’s care and yet keep integrity with his disbelief?” This is what I said – I told them about my conversation a year before, then said, “while I hate to have the final word, I really hope that right now he is sitting in heaven with Jesus having a good old discussion about how he got it so wrong!”

Today I want to talk about this topic of life after death in the context of our sermon series, *Welcome to our world Jesus*. So far we have tracked the welcome Jesus got here on earth, today we will examine the reciprocal hospitality - our welcome into His eternal home! For this we move out of Luke into the book of John and the famous passage from John 14: 1-7. It is a passage that gives us so many insights into the Christian beliefs about the vexed question of what happens to us when we die. Let’s unpack this passage bit by bit.

“Do not be worried and upset”

Jesus had just been talking to the disciples about his own impending death. They were understandably agitated about this; the good news bible uses the words “worried and upset”, the NIV says “do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The word in Greek translated ‘troubled’ is ‘tarasso’ – it has a primary meaning of ‘agitation’ and was applied to water. I remember my grandmother’s old agitator washing machine. And I also remember a sailing trip. We were some distance offshore and sailing along in smooth water when, in the distance, we saw agitated water. We came upon it more quickly than expected. Suddenly the waves were huge and coming at us from all directions. I was standing at the back of the boat hanging on to a railing for dear life. I was traumatised by it and had nightmares about being tossed off the boat into the raging sea!

The disciples knew this same fear. The Sea of Galilee is renowned for sudden and violent storms as the wind comes over the eastern mountains and drops suddenly onto the sea. The gospels talk about this (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25). The image Jesus is invoking for these disciples of being caught in a storm, with no place to put down anchor, nor any safe harbour! Death can create that feeling in us, either as we face death or in the grief drenched aftermath of the death of a loved one. In many years of pastoral ministry I have

experienced many people who are agitated around issues of death and the uncertainty of life after death!

In my time as a minister I have conducted over 400 funerals. The 2 most popular readings at funerals, by far, are Psalm 23 and John 14. Psalm 23 is reassuring, “even though I walk through the shadow of death I will fear no evil...” But John begins with an acknowledgement that death can be a scary prospect!

So where does our respite come in the face of the uncertainties, questions, anxieties associated with death and life after death? In Luke 8:22-27, when the disciples are caught in a sudden storm, Jesus is asleep in the boat. They awake him with the words “we are about to die!” – there it is again, this agitation about death. Jesus calms the storm then turns to them with the question “where is your faith?”

There is a similar response in John 14. In the aftermath of his acknowledgement that talk of his death has upset them, he calls upon them to *“trust in God, trust also in me.”*

There are two things that I take out of this:

- Firstly, this is a situation where we do not know all the answers. Therefore, we have to have some trust! I have been looking into this issue for years, poring over biblical texts and engaging in both theological and pastoral conversations about it *and* I still have lots of questions, yet Jesus is saying “OK, I get that, but you just have to trust me here!” Which leads to my second point.
- Secondly, where do we put our trust? The arguments for death as the end, that there is no life after death, are strong, as are, in my view, the arguments *for* life after death! Which way will I go with this? ‘The God Delusion’ (Richard Dawkins) or the Bible? Given that there are credible arguments for both, where do I land? I want to put my trust in the answer that provides hope, meaning and the possibility of a loving eternal future! I choose to trust Jesus on this!

Jesus then goes on to be more specific about life after death:

“There are many rooms in my Father’s house”

The word rooms is traditionally ‘mansions’, but in the Greek it is more the idea of ‘abiding place’. The Greek word is only used one other time in scripture – it is later in John 14, in verse 23, when Jesus says “whoever loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and my Father and I will come to him and live with him.” This has the idea of God taking up residence in our hearts, abiding within us. The same idea here applies to the afterlife of abiding with God.

One question I get is, heaven must be an awfully big place to take all the people from planet earth throughout history. The idea of ‘many rooms’ though, communicates for me a biblical idea about heaven, it is not confined by space as this universe is. It is another dimension outside of time and space, therefore the question about being able to fit everyone in is rendered irrelevant!

I love the next bit....

“I am going to prepare a place for you”

What proof do we have for life after death? Well, there is the fact that over 80% of the world believe in life after death (why so many if there was not some reality in this?) And there are the many personal testimonies of people who have been clinically dead, or who watched loved ones die, and something in those experiences that led to the conclusion that there is life after death. But, for Christians, the clincher is the resurrection of Jesus. Again, this requires faith, but the evidence in my view is compelling. And a key aspect of his resurrection is that Jesus goes before us, he prepares the way for us; in biblical language where 1 Corinthians 15 refers to Jesus' resurrection as a type of 'First Fruit'

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (v15:20)

Then there is the beautiful comfort in his words “I will come back and take you to myself.” I say beautiful comfort because of the potential loneliness of the dying process. Over the years many have talked with me about having peace about life after death but anxiety about the process of dying. The comfort derived from talking with them about the promise that Jesus will never leave us alone on this journey. This is an incredibly comforting thought! If we think about the two pictures of abiding in John 14 - 'God abiding in our hearts' v23, and 'us abiding in the Father's house after death' - there is also an assurance that there will be no 'gap' or 'absence' in the journey between the two!

I am going to stop there – this is to be resumed next week. There is much more to talk about, like:

When he says 'the place I am going' – where is that and what will it be like? *And* are there two places that we could be headed – heaven or hell? The idea of hell certainly causes lots of agitation. What do we make of biblical material around that?

And what do we make of Jesus' statement “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the father except by me.” According to this statement, who is in and who is out? Where does that leave people from other religions?

So many questions? You may have more yourself – email them to me or phone me, and I will put them into the mix for next week!

But, most importantly, be assured that peace comes when we overcome all our anxiety by placing simple trust in Jesus and the power of his resurrection. In the words of Jesus towards the end of the chapter:

“Peace is what I leave you: it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world gives it. Do not be worried or upset; do not be afraid”