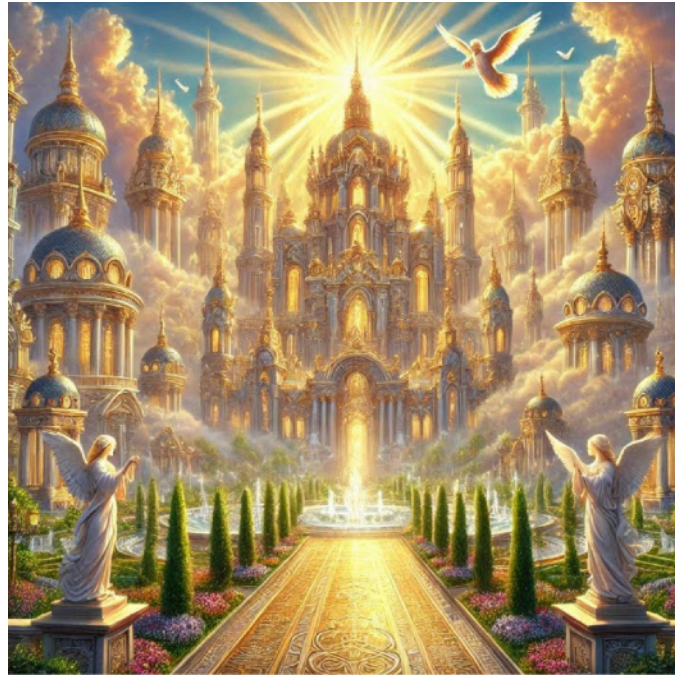

The Rooms in My Father's House

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 3 May 2026

Acts 7:55-60 • John 14:1-14



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

If you have attended any funerals recently, especially if I've led them, you will be familiar with today's Gospel. It is, to me, the most reassuring thing in all the Gospels. It is Jesus' most loving words. It is what gives us assurance that we will be with him and with the Father when we die. I am especially comforted by Jesus saying that he will take us to heaven himself, there to be with him forever. There is plenty of room for us in heaven, and our rooms are prepared for us; and they will be beautiful rooms.

Stephen learns the truth of this in our first reading. He has been telling the people of Jerusalem about Jesus, and they have not been receptive. They are so unreceptive, in fact, that they stone him to death, believing that he is speaking blasphemy. But as they begin to do this, Stephen looks up and sees Jesus at the right hand of God. Jesus is there to lead Stephen to his home in heaven, just as Jesus said he would. Stephen is in the hands of our Lord.

Jesus is the way, the only way, for us to attain eternal life. If we keep Jesus in our hearts while we live, we will be with him when we die. Only Jesus can do this. Only Jesus can take us to the Father. In saying this, Jesus emphasised that the old way of worship, the sacrifices and the many many rules which the Jews expounded, and filled book after book with, would not bring you to eternal life. Following the laws of Moses would not do it. Sacrificing lambs and goats would not do it. You must accept Jesus in your life in order to come to the Father in eternity. This is the message which Jesus' followers have to accept, and it made the difference between his disciples and those who continued to follow the Jewish faith. If we take this literally, and we must, it means that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. This is what we believe.

It is difficult to profess this in today's world, when people claim that there are many ways to heaven, and all faiths are true, and Christians and Jews and Muslims all worship the same God. As there is only one God, that is true in a way; but it matters what you believe about your God. Every person must choose what they believe. I believe that Jesus is the way to God, which Jews and Muslims will disagree with. So in my belief, they will not attain salvation, because they are not accepting Jesus. If I am honest with myself, this is what I believe. Muslims and Jews will believe differently, and think that I am wrong, that I will not see heaven because I don't believe what they believe. They may say they worship the same God, but they have a false picture of God, in my view. I would maintain that if you have a false picture of God, then your God is not my God — indeed, your God doesn't actually exist.

What do we do with this? Our beliefs naturally drive our actions, but it's not always helpful for me to tell a Jew or a Muslim (or an atheist, for that matter) flatly that they are mistaken (and it may be dangerous). Jesus tells us to spread the Gospel. It is always best to do this with a positive attitude, offering the truth of Jesus to those who do not know him. We invite rather than tell. Some Christians in history have tried it the other way, forcing their beliefs — it doesn't work.

In addition, Jesus asks us to live humbly and serve God. Although I have strong beliefs, I am a fallible human being, who is spending a lifetime to learn about God. Can I make strong declarative statements about God and still be humble? Yes, if I let the Holy Spirit guide my actions and my words. I may speak the truth about God and Jesus Christ, if I have studied by Bible, and have prayed for guidance. If I speak in faith, and not for purposes of my own, my words will be true, and I need not shy away from speaking. Spreading the Gospel is by direction. God knows which of his lost sheep will respond to the Gospel, and which will not. Some of us speak of the ones who will respond as "people of peace," after the instructions Jesus gives to the disciples when he

sends them out in pairs to visit the nearby towns and villages. He tells them to say “Peace be with you” when they enter a house, and if their peace is returned to them — that is, if the people there also wish peace for the disciple — then they are to stay. If their peace is not returned, they are to leave that house and go elsewhere. So the people of peace are those who respond positively to the Gospel.

The way to find these people of peace is through prayer. At the end of our Gospel reading, Jesus tells the disciples they must believe that he and God are one. Then he says, “If in my name, you ask me for anything, I will do it.” This is a tremendous statement. It justifies all our prayer; in fact, it invites our prayer. Jesus is going to the Father. The disciples don’t fully realise it yet, but that is what will happen. After the crucifixion and the Resurrection, the way to speak to Jesus will be through prayer, enabled by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is telling us to turn to him first when we want or need something, and he will hear our prayers. When we need help, whether it’s about ourselves, or our family or friends or our parish or our world, the first thing we should do is pray. And never forget Paul’s advice to pray constantly. This cannot be over-emphasised. Prayer is the key to all things — because it connects us with Jesus, and Jesus is the answer to all things.

We pray for ourselves and we pray for others. We do not control God with our prayers. God’s will will be done. But part of God’s will is, again, that we pray constantly. If we let him, God brings us into alignment with his will, and we recognise that God’s way is the best way. God uses our prayer to teach us and mould us, in time, to be his perfect children. This is true today, it will be true on the day Jesus takes us home, and it will be true when we are enjoying eternal Communion with him in our home in heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.