

The Way, the Truth and the Life ...

... the greater reality of the Father's Love

A sermon given on the fifth Sunday of Easter, 7th May 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

John 14:1-14

The late comedian Spike Milligan once told a lovely story about being caught speeding on a speed camera. After the camera flashed, a few days later he got a summons through the post informing him that he had been caught on camera and was liable for a fine of 40 pounds. And just in case there was any doubt, the summons included a photograph of Milligan's car going past the speed camera. Spike Milligan's response to receiving the photograph was to write to the court, thanking them for their photo of his speeding car and enclosing his own photograph of four ten pound notes. It clearly went to a court official with a sense of humour, because the next thing was a letter from the court enclosing a photograph of a pair of handcuffs.

It's a lovely example of the relationship between images and reality, the reality they're meant to represent. The photograph from the speed camera was only a piece of paper, but it showed the law had been broken: the image and the reality it represented were linked and linked closely. The photograph of the 40 pounds on the other hand, while it showed real money, didn't show that the fine had been paid: the link between the image and the reality was too weak. And the final photograph of the handcuffs was, of course, a threat: the handcuffs hadn't yet been applied, no arrest had yet been made, but there definitely would be one if the fine wasn't paid. So in each case, the relationship between image and the reality the image represents is slightly different.

And this goes on all the time. We are surrounded by images and symbols where one thing represents something else. Yesterday's coronation was stuffed full of symbolism: a sword representing justice, an orb representing a world under the authority of Christ; the oil representing the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so on. And language only works because words represent the realities they are applied to. When I talk about a piece of paper, I'm just making sounds with my tongue, but those sounds indicate a physical reality you can see and touch and write on. Our language is full of simile and metaphor and imagery, where we talk about one thing when we mean something else. And so when the song talks about 'The windmills of your mind', it doesn't literally mean your head is full of windmills, but your head is full of thoughts spinning around and not going anywhere. The world is full of symbol and metaphor and representation, where one thing stands in for another.

And in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus says, *"If you know me, you will know my Father a/so."* In other words, Jesus is claiming to represent the Father in heaven. Philip, on the other hand, is very literal minded and doesn't get this idea of symbol and image. So he says, "Lord, just show us the Father and we will be satisfied." For Philip, Jesus is like the photograph of the 40 pounds in my opening story: a picture of money isn't the same as real money. And for Philip, seeing Jesus isn't the same as seeing God. But Jesus insists - *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* The Father may be invisible and unknowable, but if you've seen me and you know me, says Jesus, then you've seen and known the Father.

And one of the problems with our modern world is that it is just too literal minded and fundamentalist. Many people reject Christianity because they take it far too literally. They hear the words, but don't understand what's being meant. It's like they're standing in front of a hundred floor skyscraper, but they're only seeing the ground floor lobby. And when people say, 'How can Christianity be based on a Palestinian peasant 2000 years ago?' They're missing what Jesus means when he says, *"I am in the Father and the Father is in me."* Jesus is the gateway into something much bigger. Jesus represents something necessary, not just for people with a religious frame of mind, but for anyone who has an interest in being fully human; everyone who wants to know what is real; everyone who feels the need for acceptance; for wholeness; for peace tugging in our hearts.

Jesus represents God not just vaguely, but intimately. When we connect with Jesus, we connect not with a mere image or photograph, but with God Himself. And at yesterday's coronation, we saw a lot of this - not just objects like spurs and crowns and oil representing something else, but a human being. A man, called to represent his nation before God and before the world. And in so doing he was echoing Jesus himself, who represents his people before God, and God before his people, revealing a relationship of committed, self-giving service.

So if Jesus represents the Father, and if King Charles represents this nation, I wonder who or what do you represent? Because none of us are empty ciphers; none of us are two-dimensional photos; we all of us point beyond ourselves; we're connected to wider networks of family and society; we're connected to values and ideas and ways of living that we share. Like signposts, our role may be modest and relatively unexciting, but a signpost is never just a piece of wood or steel: it is full of meaning; it always represents something bigger; it can point towards the heavenly city; or it may point somewhere else altogether.

So who or what do you represent? For whom are you an ambassador? To what bigger reality have you given your life? Which way are you pointing?

Jesus said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* So as we receive the bread and the wine this morning, those symbols representing something much bigger and greater, may our lives also be opened up to the greater reality of the Father's love. And may our lives bear witness to the greater reality of that way, that truth, and that life.

Reading Text

John 14:1-14

¹ Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶ Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.' ⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.