

"I am the way' (John 14:6)

(A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 2 May 1999)

John 14:1-9

Picturing life as a journey is a very old and very natural way of thinking about human lives. We move from one day to the next, one year to the next, one period of our life to another, just as on a journey one travels from place to place. The picture helps us to imagine that our life is going somewhere, whether we think of this as travelling a route we know will lead to the destination we wish to reach, with signposts at every turn to keep us on track, or whether we think of it more in terms of a quest, a journey in search of some elusive prize that we may yet discover. We may think of the route through life as laid out for us, with a series of stages we have to traverse: growing up, leaving home and so on to the end that must come to every one of our journeys sooner or later: death. Or we may think more in terms of goals we set ourselves, places we want to go to, so long as we can find the way. Some of you, I'm sure, will know the often quoted poem by Robert Frost which ends

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

One of the features of life's journey is coming to a fork or a crossroads and facing the choice of direction, knowing full well that one will never be able to go back and try the other road later. Life is a journey on which there is no turning back.

I have to admit that this way of thinking of life as a single and purposeful journey towards a goal has become less popular in our culture. Contemporary life tends to fragment and go in all directions at once. Purpose and direction are valued less than experience. This is travelling more in the sense that the tourism industry means it. We are not travellers set on a journey to a destination at the end, but tourists travelling through, moving from place to place in order to experience each. The aim is not to get somewhere, but simply to keep moving on in order to be constantly enjoying the novelty of new places.

It's probably not a very satisfying image of life. Tourism has its pleasures, of course, but too much of it simply leaves us with the 'been there, done that' feeling. Constant novelty palls. Been there, done that, now what? That's one of the ways we can reach a point of weariness with the journey, or perplexity or frustration. No longer absorbed in the pleasures or the demands of travel itself, we come to a halt and wonder where it is we are going or really want to go. But there are lots of other ways of getting to that point. Some despair of reaching the goal they have so long sought, they come up against an impassable road block and do not see how they can go on at all. Others find themselves lost in a seemingly endless labyrinth of twisting paths that seem to lead nowhere except into a deeper and deeper sense of futility. Some of us come, like Robert Frost, to the fork in the road and realise we neither know where either path leads nor any longer really know where it is we want to go.

It is to such people, lost on life's way, seeking direction, that Jesus speaks in our Gospel reading today. He is himself setting out on a journey, he has been telling his

disciples. And Jesus knows where he is going. He is returning to his father's house. It's one of the oldest and most appealing ways of thinking of life's journey. Like Homer's Odysseus, wouldn't we all like to think that, whatever adventures lie along life's way, ahead of us at the end is a final homecoming to the place where, more than any other, we want finally to stay? But Jesus is going home not just for himself, but to make his Father's house a home for his disciples too. He goes to get their rooms ready for them - I was going to say the guest rooms, but the thought is rather that the disciples will not be mere guests, but at home in the house of God. The end of their journey is to be with Jesus where he now lives in his Father's home: 'if I go and prepare a place for you, I shall come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also; and you know the way I am taking.'

Thomas protests: they don't know the way Jesus is taking. They don't even know where his destination is, how can they possibly know the route to it? Thomas wants a map. If we are to follow Jesus on his journey home, shouldn't he have left us a map? Shouldn't we know where the destination is, and so be able to work out the best route to it, taking the clear straight roads with signposts, avoiding the twisting paths that peter out and leave us clueless? Thomas wants a map, but Jesus gives a most extraordinary reply: 'I am the way... no one comes to the Father except through me.' Jesus himself is the only road that leads home to the Father's house. To every one who has lost their way in life, Jesus says: I am the way. To all of us when we might otherwise lose the way, Jesus reminds us: I am the way.

For the first disciples, there would be another very special resonance in Jesus' words. The most famous way in the Old Testament Scriptures was the Israelites' way through the wilderness to the promised land, when God had led his people every step of the way from Egypt to the land that was to be their home and, in a sense also, his home with them. When Israel was scattered from the land in exile, the prophets looked for the time when God would again lead his people back from exile to their homeland. Imaginatively they picture a great highway through the wilderness along which the exiles will travel on their journey home. Isaiah (35:8-10) says:

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

When Jesus says, 'I am the way,' he claims to be that highway to Zion, the heavenly temple that is his Father's house: Jesus himself is that way to the great joyful and final, homecoming of God's people. He is the way on which no one who travels can go astray.

But what can that really mean: that Jesus himself is the way? Two things we might think of it doesn't mean, or at least they are not all it means. Jesus we might think is the way because he teaches us the way to live. Of course, he does, and we certainly cannot expect to find the way home to God unless we live in the way Jesus taught people to. The first Christians in Palestine actually called Christianity, what being a Christian was, 'the way' - meaning both a distinctive way of life and the way God was leading them to a destination. But if Jesus merely taught the way, we couldn't say he is the way. We could learn the way from his teaching and forget about Jesus himself. The way would be separable from Jesus, which cannot be the case if Jesus is the way.

Or we might think that Jesus is the way in the sense that he himself has followed the way in order to leave us an example we may follow. This is essentially what discipleship means. Jesus has blazed the trail so that we can see where to go and follow in his footsteps. This also is true and it is certainly getting closer to Jesus' meaning when he says: 'I am the way.' But Jesus says to the disciples that he is going home, not to wait there for the disciples to join him, but in order to return to his disciples and to take them home. Not just in the example he has left or in the trail he has blazed for us, but in his presence with us, guide and companion along the way, and in Jesus' identifying with us and our identifying with him, do we find Jesus himself to be the way.

What the disciples, of course, could not grasp at the time, but we can see, is that the way Jesus was taking to his Father's house led through Gethsemane and Calvary. With hindsight we can see that the way he took from the beginning of his ministry onwards was bound to lead that way in the end. That was the only way he could travel home and also take us home with him. We can meet Jesus and find him to be the way at any point on Jesus' way in the story the Gospels tell us - when he calls his disciples, when he heals the sick, when he blesses children, when he tells of God's care or demands that someone give all his wealth to the poor, when he washes his disciples' feet. It may be at any such point that we who have lost our own way can find it in Jesus' way. But it is not a way that keeps to the sunny uplands. It also plunges into the darkest valleys and negotiates the most treacherous places. Jesus is the way in suffering and pain, in temptation and guilt, in fear and opposition, in loneliness and death. He is not the way round these things but the way through them, the only way there is to the Father's house.

But there is no map. Rarely can we see far ahead along the road. We do not know which paths we must take until we reach them and perhaps not even then. Often we shall feel lost. Indeed, finding the way on this road could not be more unlike following a map. Time and again, it is only by losing what we thought was the way that we can find the way. Along the familiar road that feels so right that we imagine an easy walk the rest of our way, we suddenly find ourselves bewildered. The familiar landmarks have gone. Perhaps the travelling companions we have come to rely on are no longer with us. Where are we? There is no map to help us, and in the strictest sense we do not know where we are going. But we know that Jesus is the way, in his companionship we cannot go astray, and by attending to Jesus we shall find the way again in him. Often it is only by losing what we thought was the way that we can find the way. And only because that is the paradox of this journey can it lead in the end through death to the Father's house. It is the one who loses his life

who finds it. And Jesus who in losing his life found not only his but also ours - Jesus is the way.

'Have I been with you so long, Philip, and still you do not know me?' Jesus might have said the same to Thomas. The key thing in finding the way is knowing Jesus. Attending to Jesus. Reading the Gospel stories in order to know Jesus. Reading of the way he took in order to know the way he takes us. At every major point on the way we have to recognize him afresh, as the way in *this* circumstance, the direction at this crossroads, the companion in this impenetrable fog, up this steep cliff, and through this sunlit meadow where, yes, we have time to rest and enjoy.

You'll notice perhaps that I've left most of our Gospel passage without comment. I haven't even explained what Jesus means when he says, not just, I am the way, but (further) I am the way, the truth and the life. I haven't time to do so. But I thought this particular image of Jesus as the way is such a fruitful one it was worth pondering. The sixth-century Christian philosopher Boethius put the gist of the passage beautifully in these lines:

To see thee is the end and the beginning;
Thou carriest us, and thou dost go before,
Thou art the journey and the journey's end.