

**SERMON: 14 May 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson**

**“I go to prepare a place for you”**

**John 14:1-14**

**Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (1 – 3)**

Where was Jesus going? The disciples didn’t know. These verses are read at most Christian funeral services and it is explained that Jesus was returning to his Father in heaven and he would one day come and take us to the place he has prepared for us in heaven and so we will be with him forever.

What do you think of when you contemplate heaven? Are you looking forward to heaven? I would guess that you have not heard too many sermons on heaven. I heard one once about ten years ago. Howard Espie was a young man with a passion for God and a way with words and he spoke movingly about our journey to heaven and what we might see and how awesome and amazing it is! He was a young man but he longed for the day when he would go there! He is now a minister in the Church of Scotland.

But that sermon stood out because I hadn’t heard one like it.

Paul was taken up to heaven in a vision, he did not know whether in the body or out of the body, but God did not permit him to speak about it (2 Corinthians 12). What he saw must have been good because he wrote to the Philippians (1 : 21 – 23) –

**For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two : I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far....**

Paul longed for heaven and the physical presence of Jesus.

Many people do not have that excitement and anticipation when they think of heaven. I have heard people say that heaven will be boring! All that singing with choirs of angels. Perhaps the novelty and intrigue of heaven will fade after a while as do most things on earth but we’re stuck with it for an eternity! How do you feel when you sing “When we’ve been there 10,000 years....we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.” Are you encouraged by that or can you not get your heads round 10,000 years or a million years or a trillion years?

A pastor in America confessed “Whenever I think about heaven, it makes me depressed. I’d rather just cease to exist when I die. I can’t stand the thought of that endless tedium. To float around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp.....it’s all so terribly boring.”

A Church of England vicar was asked what he expected after death. He replied “Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss but I really wish you wouldn’t bring up such depressing subjects.”

Why do so many Christians, including educated ordained pastors, have such a vague, negative and uninspired view of heaven?

It is most likely the work of Satan. Jesus said that Satan is a liar and the father of lies. In Revelation 13:6 it says that the satanic beast opens its mouth to blaspheme God and to slander his name and his dwelling place and all who live in heaven.

Satan has been evicted from heaven and he cannot bear it that we humans are now entitled to a place in the home he was cast out of. If Satan convinces us that heaven is boring, dull, undesirable, then we lose the joy and anticipation of going there, we might even dread it.

Heaven is not up in the clouds, it is not some space filled with disembodied spirits. Jesus used words his disciples could understand when he said his father’s house has many rooms and he goes to prepare a place.

Can we grasp the wonder of heaven, the beauty, the peace, the complete satisfaction we will find there? Can we journey through this life with confidence and our eyes fixed on that prize?

In 1952 a young woman named Florence Chadwick set off to swim from Catalina Island to the shore of mainland California. She had been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways and she was sure she could do this swim in the Pacific. It was foggy and cold and she could hardly see the boats accompanying her. She swam for 15 hours and then she begged to be taken out of the water, she could go no further. Her mother in a boat nearby told her it was not much further and she could make it. But she stopped swimming and was pulled out of the water only to then discover that she was less than half a mile from shore. At a news conference later she said “All I could see was the fog....I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”

For believers that shore is Jesus Christ and being with him in that place he has promised to prepare for us where we will be with him forever. If we can see through the fog and picture our eternal home then we will be comforted and filled with hope and anticipation.

How do we get to heaven? We are familiar with the verse that tells us that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life and no-one comes to the Father – enters heaven – except through him.

But what actually happens when we die?

Scripture tells us the present heaven is a temporary heaven and not our final destination. Revelation 21 tells us that Christ will come back in triumph to claim his own, his beloved bride, his church. And what did John see?

**“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying “Now the dwelling of God is with men and women and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.”**

So the present heaven is a temporary heaven and will be replaced in time with a new heaven and a new earth.

1 Thessalonians 4 :13 -18 speaks of what will happen when the Lord returns – people were becoming concerned that Christians were dying and being buried and Christ had not yet returned so what would become of them? Paul wrote – from The Message -

**13-14** And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.

**15-18** And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words.

So at the second coming of Christ then, there will be a bodily resurrection of those who have died and also an ingathering of those who are still alive at that time – what is popularly referred to as the Rapture.

Does this mean that all those who have died over hundreds of years are not yet with the Lord? Some believe that. Because heavenly time is different from earthly time, they would argue that death seems to be instantly followed by resurrection whether the gap is a thousand years or an hour, it is the same for all.

But that is not the whole story because it takes no account of the spirit. It is obvious that the spirit leaves the body with the final breath, it is no longer contained in the body. How often people say of the body after death that it is just an empty shell.

The spirit has gone to the present heaven where God sits on his throne and Jesus sits at his side. When someone goes home to the Lord, heaven touches earth. Jesus comes to take us home, he walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death into the light of his heavenly kingdom.

Jesus said to the thief on the cross that he would be with him in paradise today. Not tomorrow or in more than 2000 years, but today.

I think that heaven is closer than we imagine. There are places on earth where it is easy to sense the presence of heaven. Iona is one of these places. It is called the thin place because heaven almost seems to touch earth on the narrow strip of land in the sea, the thin ribbon of rock and sand and machar hardly rising out of the water.

We probably all know of thin places we have visited. Sometimes a ordinary places becomes a thin place because we sense the presence of the holy spirit. Perhaps even church can be a thin place when we are fully engaged in worship and open to God!

Heaven is not far away. We often read in the bible that God or an angel speaks to someone from heaven, as if a portal can open and sound travel.

Moses and Elijah met with Jesus on the mountain in the transfiguration. How far had they come and where did they return to?

We see only three dimensions, our whole world and our perception copes only with three dimensions. We see height and length and depth. But a popular theory, superstring theory, suggests there are ten dimensions (other theories suggest 11 or even 26 dimensions). The fourth dimension is time and then I get lost in the physics in which time and space interact to create numerous further dimensions. One scientist wrote "In the **tenth and final dimension**, we arrive at the point in which everything possible and imaginable is covered. Beyond this, nothing can be imagined by us lowly mortals, which makes it the natural limitation of what we can conceive in terms of dimensions."

Is there a closer relationship between heaven and earth than we imagine?

I think of Star Trek and the cloaking device that made a spaceship invisible. The spaceship exists in its solid massive form but it could be inches away and unseen until the cloaking device was deactivated and there it was.

Another verse often read at funeral services is 1 Corinthians 2 : 9 – **No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”**

So heaven is in some unseen dimension. But we should also read the next verse, verse 10 - **No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.**

The Holy Spirit is within us and the Holy Spirit is in heaven. The Holy Spirit knows what heaven is like! So we can ask the Holy Spirit to give us glimpses of what heaven might be like. We can ask the Holy Spirit for to give us joy when we think of heaven. Joy is good for us! Nowhere in scripture does it say that heaven is dull or boring or undesirable! Being in the presence of Jesus himself will be reward enough and yet he wants to give us more and more, more pleasure and greater delights. We will gasp with wonder when we get to heaven. Our loved ones who have gone before us are having the time of their lives, complete lives, whole lives, new lives.

And there are so many facets of God and of heaven that we will never tire of exploring them, there is always more to discover, we will never get to the end of God.

I heard God described at a conference on Friday as being like a huge diamond with so many sides or facets that they cannot be counted. As we go deeper into God we find there are more depths to be fathomed.

Of course there are many questions we have about heaven. What will we look like in heaven? Will we recognise each other? What will we experience together? Will we sleep, work, play? What will our relationships be like?

These questions might be addressed in the next sermon!

For the time being, I would sum up in the words of the great theologian Jonathan Edwards who wrote an amazing sermon entitled “Heaven a world of love.”

He said that in heaven our resurrected body will come equipped with unimaginable capacity for joy. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 said that our resurrected body will be far better than anything we knew on earth. Our body will be stronger, fuller, more spiritual, more glorious and everlasting. Our delight and knowledge and emotions will be renewed. An enormous amount of joy.

But some might still say that joy could fizzle out. Edwards says no because we will have an ever-increasing capacity for joy. You will look at each day through

some new lens where you see more clearly, understand more fully, feel more deeply the truest joy, ever-increasing, ever-full joy for all eternity.

But won't we run out of things to enjoy after 10,000 years? Edwards again says no because God is infinite and endlessly deep and inexhaustible. Christ's love, grace, kindness, wisdom, power and mercy are never-ending.

Now when you sing "When we've been there 10,000 years" you have no need to dread or doubt. You will not be the same person as you once were. After 10,000 years you will look back and say "How little I knew of him then. How much I have grown in my love for him. Yet how much more I still have to learn of his character!"

Amen