

## Historic Commentary

(Fifth Sunday in Easter - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

---

### Commentary on John 14:1-14 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

\*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen

Augustine: Our Lord consoles his disciples who, as men, would be naturally alarmed and troubled at the idea of his death, by assuring them of his divinity, ... “Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in me,” as if they must believe in him if they believed in God. This would not follow unless Christ were God.... You are in fear for this form of a servant. Let not your heart be troubled. The form of God shall raise it up.

Cyril of Alexandria: In commanding them not to be troubled, Jesus placed them, as it were, on the threshold between hope and fear. This way, if they fell into weakness and suffering in their human frailty, the hope of his mercy might help them to recover. On the other hand, the fear of stumbling might urge them to fall less often inasmuch as they had not yet been endowed with the power from above, from on high—I mean the grace that comes through the Spirit that always keeps them from failure.

Chrysostom: He shows the power of the Godhead within him, discerning their inward feelings when he says, “Let not your heart be troubled.” “Believe in God, believe also in me.” ... Faith, too, in me, and in the Father who begat me, is more powerful than anything that shall come on you. And it will permit no evil thing to prevail against you.

Cyril of Alexandria: Here, Jesus makes an able soldier out of one who recently was a coward. And while the disciples were suffering with the anxieties of fear, he commands them to cling to the intense power of faith.... Faith is a weapon whose blade is stout and broad; it drives away all cowardice that may spring from the expectation of coming suffering and renders the darts of evildoers utterly void of effect and makes their temptations utterly profitless.

Irenaeus: All things belong to God, who supplies all with a suitable dwelling place, even as his Word says that a share is allotted to all by the Father, according as each person is or shall be worthy. And this is the couch on which the guests shall recline, having been invited to the wedding.

Tertullian: Owing to the fact that our flesh is undergoing dissolution through its sufferings, we shall be provided with a home in heaven.... Because he had called the flesh a house, he wanted to use the same term elegantly in his comparison of the ultimate reward, promising to the very house that undergoes dissolution through suffering a better house through the resurrection, just as the Lord also promises us many mansions like that of a house in his Father's home.

Augustine: But he is in a certain sense preparing the dwellings by preparing for them the dwellers. As, for instance, when he said, "In my Father's house are many dwellings." What else can we suppose the house of God to mean but the temple of God? And what that is, ask the apostle, and he will reply, "For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are." This is also the kingdom of God that the Son is yet to deliver up to the Father.... For it is to this kingdom, standing then at the right hand, that it shall be said in the end, "Come, you blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom."<sup>14</sup> In other words, you who were the kingdom but without the power to rule, come and reign so that what you formerly were only in hope, you may now have the power to be in reality. This house of God, therefore, this temple of God, this kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven, is as yet in the process of building, of construction, of preparation, of assembling. There will be dwellings in it even as the Lord is now preparing them. There are in fact such dwellings already even as the Lord has already ordained them.

Theodore of Mopsuestia: With my Father there is such an abundance that he can give everyone the delights of eternal happiness.... He tells us that here since the custom among us, when space is scarce, is to reserve a place to stay in advance due to lack of available rooms.

Cyril of Alexandria: If there were not many mansions in God the Father's home, he would have said that he was going on before them to prepare beforehand the homes of the saints. But since he already knew that there were many homes already fully prepared and

awaiting the arrival of those who love God, he says that he will depart, but not for this purpose. Rather, he leaves in order to secure the way to the mansions above, to prepare a passage of safety for you and to smooth the paths that were formerly impassible. For in times of old, heaven was utterly inaccessible to mortals, and no flesh as yet had ever traveled that pure and all-holy realm of the angels. But Christ was the first who consecrated for us the means of access to himself and granted to flesh a way of entrance into heaven. He did this by presenting himself as an offering to God the Father, the “firstfruits of those who are asleep” and are lying in the tomb, and by presenting himself as the first human being that ever appeared in heaven.... For Christ did not ascend on high in order to present himself before the presence of God the Father. He always was and is and will be continually in the Father, in the sight of him who begat him. For he is the one in whom the Father takes delight. Rather, he who of old was the Word with no part or lot in human nature has now ascended in human form so that he may appear in heaven in a strange and unusual manner. And this he has done on our account and for our sakes in order that he, though “found as a man,” may still in his absolute power as Son—while yet in human form—obey the command, “Sit at my right hand,” and in this way transfer the glory of adoption through himself to the entire human race. For because he has appeared in human form, he is still one of us as he sits at the right hand of God the Father, even though he is far above all creation. He is also consubstantial with his Father due to the fact that he has come forth from him as truly God of God and Light of Light. He has presented himself therefore as man to the Father on our behalf so that he may restore us again, as it were, to behold the Father’s face—we who were removed from the Father’s presence by the ancient transgression ... “I shall not then,” he says, “depart to prepare mansions for you. There are already enough there. There is no need to make new homes for my creation. But I go to prepare a place for you because of the sin that has mastery over you in order that those of you who are on the earth will be able to be mingled with the holy angels. Otherwise, the holy multitude of those above would never mingle with those [below] who were so defiled. But now, when I shall have accomplished the work of uniting the world below with that above—giving you a way of access to the city on high as well—I will return again at the time of regeneration and ‘receive you with myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.’ ”

**Augustine:** But why has he gone away to prepare it, if it is ourselves that he prepares? If he leaves us, how can he prepare us? The meaning is that in order that those mansions may be prepared, the just must live by faith ... and if you see, there is no faith.... Let

Christ go away then so that he is not seen. Let him remain concealed that faith may be exercised. Then a place is prepared if you live by faith. Let faith desire so that the place desired may itself be possessed. The longing of love is the preparation of the mansion. In this way, Lord, prepare what you are preparing. For you are preparing us for yourself and yourself for us, inasmuch as you are preparing a place both for yourself in us and for us in you. For you have said, “Abide in me, and I in you.” As far as each one has been a partaker of you, some less, some more, such will be the diversity of rewards in proportion to the diversity of merits. The multitude of mansions will suit the multitude of inequalities among their occupants. But all of them, nonetheless, will live eternally and will be endlessly blessed.

Cyril of Alexandria: “I myself,” he seems to say, “am going ahead to prepare the path of entry into the heavens.” But if you wish, and if it is the delight of your heart to rest within those mansions, and if you have devoted everything to reaching that city above and dwelling in the company of the holy spirits—then “you know the way,” which is myself. For assuredly it is through me and no one else that you will ever gain that marvelous blessing. No other will ever open the heavens to you or smooth over the ground that one on earth could ever walk—except myself alone.

Leo the Great: The cross of Christ, which was set up for the salvation of mortals, is both a sacrament and an example: a sacrament whereby the divine power takes effect, an example whereby one’s devotion is excited. For to those who are rescued from the prisoner’s yoke, redemption further procures the power of following the way of the cross by imitation. For if the world’s wisdom so prides itself in its error that everyone follows the opinions and habits and whole manner of life of him whom he has chosen as his leader, how shall we share in the name of Christ except by being inseparably united to him who is, as he himself asserted, “the way, the truth and the life”—the way, that is, of holy living, the truth of divine doctrine and the life of eternal happiness.

Basil the Great: We understand the “way” to be the road to perfection, advancing in order step by step through the words of righteousness and the illumination of knowledge, always yearning for that which lies ahead and straining toward the last mile, until we reach that blessed end, the knowledge of God, with which the Lord blesses those who believe in him. For truly our Lord is a good way, a straight road with no confusing forks or turns, leading us directly to the Father. For “no one comes to the Father,” he says, “except through me.”

Such is our way up to God through his Son.

Hilary of Poitiers: He who is the way does not lead us into by-paths or trackless wastes. He who is the truth does not mock us with lies. He who is the life does not betray us into delusions, which are death. He himself has chosen these winning names to indicate the methods that he has appointed for our salvation. As the way, he will guide us to the truth. As the truth, he will establish us in the life. And therefore it is all-important for us to know what the mysterious mode is that he reveals for attaining this life. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” The way to the Father is through the Son.

Cyril of Alexandria: There are three means by which we shall reach the divine courts that are above and enter the church of the firstborn: by practicing every kind of virtue; by faith in right doctrine; by hope of the life to come. Is there anyone other than our Lord Jesus the Christ who could ever be a leader, a helper or a means for granting us success in these kinds of things? Surely not! Do not even entertain such an idea! For he himself has taught us things beyond the Law. He has pointed out to us the way that anyone might safely take that would lead to a life of incredible virtue and to a highly motivated and unhindered performance of those actions that follow the pattern of Christ. And so he himself is the truth, he is the way, that is, the true boundary of faith and the exact rule and standard of an unerring conception concerning God. For by a true belief in the Son, namely, as begotten of the very essence of God the Father and as bearing the title of Son in its fullest and truest meaning—and not even in any sense a made or created being—we shall then clothe ourselves in the confidence of a true faith. For one who has received the Son as a Son has fully confessed a belief also in him of whose essence the Son is, and that person knows and will immediately accept God as the Father. Therefore he is the truth, he is the life, for no one else will restore to us the life that is within our hopes, namely, that life that is in incorruption, blessedness and sanctification. For it is he that raises us up and who will bring us back again from the death we died under the ancient curse to the state in which we were at the beginning.

Ambrose: Lord Jesus, we do follow you, but we can come only at your bidding. No one can make the ascent without you, for you are our way, our truth, our life, our strength, our confidence, our reward. Be the way that receives us, the truth that strengthens us, the life that invigorates us.

Ambrose: By means of this image the Lord showed Philip the Father. Yes, he who looks on the Son sees, in portrait, the Father. Notice what kind of portrait is spoken of. It is truth, righteousness, the power of God. It is not silent, for it is the Word. It is not insensible, for it is Wisdom. It is not vain and foolish, for it is power. It is not soulless, for it is the life. It is not dead, for it is the resurrection.

Augustine: So then, with all these ways of speaking we still have to understand that the activities of the divine three are inseparable, so that when an activity is attributed to the Father he is not taken to engage in it without the Son and the Holy Spirit. And when it is an activity of the Son, it is not without the Son and the Holy Spirit. And when it is an activity of the Spirit, it is not without the Father and the Son. That being the case, those who have the right faith, or better still the right understanding as far as they can, know well enough that the reason it is said about the Father, “He does the works,” is that the works have their origin in the one from whom the co-working persons have their very existence. The Son, you see, is born of him, and the Holy Spirit proceeds primarily from him of whom the Son is born, being the Spirit common to them both. This is the work in which we may be doing the works of Christ, for even our very believing in Christ is the work of Christ.

John Calvin: The season of so great distress being at hand, he points out the remedy, that they may not be vanquished and overwhelmed; for he does not simply exhort and encourage them to be steadfast, but likewise informs them where they must go to obtain courage; that is, by faith, when he is acknowledged to be the Son of God, who has in himself a sufficiency of strength for maintaining the safety of his followers.

We ought always to attend to the time when these words were spoken, that Christ wished his disciples to remain brave and courageous, when they might think that every thing was in the greatest confusion; and therefore we ought to employ the same shield for warding off such assaults. It is impossible for us, indeed, to avoid feeling various emotions, but though we are shaken, we must not fall down. Thus it is said of believers, that they are not troubled, because, relying on the word of God, though very great difficulties press hard upon them, still they remain steadfast and upright.

Here he points out the method of remaining steadfast, as I have already said; that is, if our faith rest on Christ, and view him in no other light than as being present and

stretching out his hand to assist us. But it is wonderful that faith in the Father is here placed first in order, for he ought rather to have told his disciples that they ought to believe in God, since they had believed in Christ; because, as Christ is the lively image of the Father, so we ought first to cast our eyes on him; and for this reason, too, he descends to us, that our faith, beginning with him, may rise to God.

As we need no ordinary fortitude, that we may patiently endure to be so long separated from Christ, he adds another confirmation, that the disciples know that his death is not a destruction, but a passage to the Father; and next, that they know the way which they must follow, that they may arrive at the participation of the same glory. Both clauses ought to be carefully observed. First, we must see Christ, by the eyes of faith, in the heavenly glory and a blessed immortality; and, secondly, we ought to know that he is the first-fruits of our life, and that the way which was closed against us has been opened by him.

The way, the truth, and the life. He lays down three degrees, as if he had said, that he is the beginning, and the middle, and the end; and hence it follows that we ought to begin with him, to continue in him, and to end in him. We certainly ought not to seek for higher wisdom than that which leads us to eternal life, and he testifies that this life is to be found in him. Now the method of obtaining life is, to become new creatures. He declares, that we ought not to seek it anywhere else, and, at the same time, reminds us, that he is the way, by which alone we can arrive at it. That he may not fail us in any respect, he stretches out the hand to those who are going astray, and stoops so low as to guide sucking infants. Presenting himself as a leader, he does not leave his people in the middle of the course, but makes them partakers of the truth. At length he makes them enjoy the fruit of it, which is the most excellent and delightful thing that can be imagined.

And shall do greater works than these. Many are perplexed by the statement of Christ, that the Apostles would do greater works than he had done I pass by the other answers which have been usually given to it, and satisfy myself with this single answer. First, we must understand what Christ means; namely, that the power by which he proves himself to be the Son of God, is so far from being confined to his bodily presence, that it must be clearly demonstrated by many and striking proofs, when he is absent. Now the ascension of Christ was soon afterwards followed by a wonderful conversion of the world, in which the Divinity of Christ was more powerfully displayed than while he dwelt among men.

Thus, we see that the proof of his Divinity was not confined to the person of Christ, but was diffused through the whole body of the Church.

Because I go to the Father. This is the reason why the disciples would do greater things than Christ himself. It is because, when he has entered into the possession of his kingdom, he will more fully demonstrate his power from heaven. Hence it is evident that his glory is in no degree diminished, because, after his departure, the Apostles, who were only his instruments, performed more excellent works.