

Easter 5
St. John 14:1-14
May 14, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris...

The Way

"And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, "'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

I love hiking, and I love to go for hikes in large forests. One of my favorites was the Nipmuck State Forest in Ashford. I thought I knew this forest pretty well, and I had explored most of its many trails over the years. One afternoon I came across a dirt bike trail left behind by some race then had been held the weekend before. I thought it was pretty well marked, so I followed it. After a little over an hour of walking in the woods, I realized I was lost. I started to get a bit anxious, and prayed that I might find the way home. I tried backtracking my own steps, but could not even find those.

I had thought my woodsmanship skills were pretty good. Now doubt crept in on my self-assessment and personal hubris. How was I going to find my way out of this?

The more time that passed, the more panicked I got. I kept walking in circles and getting nowhere. I was very lost. I prayed some more, imploring God's help. And it was starting to get darker! Then I remembered two things: 1. You can use your watch as a compass if you can find the sun in the sky; and 2. Nowhere in Connecticut is more than a few miles from a road. I was able to find the position of the sun and co-ordinate that with the time on my watch so that I could head due south. (walking in one direction instead of in circles) I started to make headway. In 15 minutes I could hear cars ahead of me on some road. My anxiety dropped. I walked toward the sound of the cars, and eventually came out on a road, route 190, I think. I knew exactly where I was. It was 6:40 in the evening. I had been very lost. I said a prayer of thanksgiving for what I felt, what I knew had been God's help and answer to my fervent prayer, and walked home down the road to my campground, where I was staying.

For me, being lost in this way was a spiritual experience. It was also a metaphor for the spiritual life. You see, it is easy to get lost in life and walk in circles. Sometimes we lose all vestiges of our home. That is, who we are as people and what makes us happy and fulfilled. We get caught up along the way in life in the daily drudge of making things happen, supporting ourselves and our families and our debts from our "stuff", that we lose sight of who we are spiritually, and what makes us tick. We go in circles in life, and we hardly even know how lost we are. We may yearn for better days ahead of us, or in our own past, but how do I get there? What is the way?

Now if this were Advent, I would be asking, what time is it? Look at your watch. Look at a calendar! I am not sure that this isn't good advice year-round. What time is it? Is it time to go home? How much time do you have left to spend being lost in the thicket of life? Me—I know I would be scared and am sometimes!

What is the way home and how do I find it?

Jesus proclaims that He is the way, the truth, the life. What does it mean to say someone is the way?

The apostles obviously had trouble with this. While they spent a lot of time with Jesus, they did not get who he is, at least not for a while. How can they know Jesus is God walking the earth? The Gospel of John indicates He told them. They knew Him as friend, companion and teacher. It was hard for them to move from their familiarity to realizing Jesus was much more than the basic ways they experienced him. Indeed, Philip's questions triggered this response from Jesus: "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"? 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. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me..."

How can we know Jesus in this way 2,000 plus years later? How will we know God present and at work in our lives? How can we know God? How can we know a God whom we have never seen? Somehow, Jesus is the answer. Somehow, Jesus is the way. Saying that, doesn't get me there. How can I find my way?

Our complex and full lives leave little time for ourselves or any interior journey. They leave less time for a search for God. When we have a free moment, we just want to take a breath, eat a little something and rest. What we were put on earth to do seems to get short shrift. We just move from day to day and get stuff done, hoping our lives will not become more complicated. But somehow, they almost always do. We become very lost in this complex web of stuff, obligations, indebtedness, guilt and the expectations of others around us. How can we find our way out of the deep woods and head home?

In this effort, Jesus is like a flashlight to show us the way forward through the darkness. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." To know Jesus is to know the way. Simply put, our task seems to be to know Jesus.

So how do we know Jesus? Imagine the frustration of God. Jesus gives it voice this morning in the Gospel, responding to Philip: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" We can hear those words spoken to us. We are not new to this game. We have heard about Jesus all our lives. We know the basics about Him. And yet, we could know a lot more. Knowing Jesus is vital to our lives. Knowing Jesus is the way out of the darkness, unless you want to continue groping around and getting nowhere. Look for His light.

The light of Jesus begins to be found in the sacred word of God. We can read about Jesus in the four Gospels. Taken together, they give us knowledge of what God was doing in the person of Jesus Christ. The rest of the New Testament reflects on the way of Jesus and God's impact on the early followers of the way. Consider the number of Christians up to the present day, even this month, who have laid down their lives that we might have the luxury of finding our way home.

Scripture is one place we come to meet Jesus and know about God, but also the gathered community of Christians is another living place. The Eucharist is central to this. Jesus left us this living memorial, this sacrament, to help us come as close to Him as His first century followers. The risen Christ is known to us in the breaking of the bread, just as He was at the supper in Emmaus. The gathered community of Christians can support one another on this journey along the Way of Jesus. We can also share our knowledge, learning and experience with each other, pointing out our own experience of the way. I find listening and learning from others about the Way very helpful. Hearing about the valleys and mountain peaks, the rivers to cross, the barriers to move or walk around is most helpful. It affirms that I am not the only one who wanders off the path sometimes, and it affirms my own experience of the Way. At other times I get helpful hints that lead to breakthroughs in meeting Jesus in this walk through the woods of life.

As I read and reread the passage for this morning, the words of John 10:30 kept coming to my mind: "I and the Father are one." God walked the earth in the person of Jesus. God came to clear up our doubts and show us the way. God is the way, and God is best and most fully revealed in Jesus. The words of Jesus in this morning's Gospel are like what philosophers and logicians call a tautology: (a universal and essential truth) God is the way. God is God and the way to God. No one comes to God except through God. Jesus is God.

Faith and personal experience along the way reveal this truth to us.

There may be other roads that will bring you close to home, but if you think about it, there is only one road that will get you there. Jesus is the street where we live, hence, to follow Jesus is to find our way home. Many roads lead us into Hartford, Connecticut, but only one road will get you to my home. We can say the same about the spiritual life.

The collect for today is an appropriate close to these remarks today. My own spiritual director, Fr. Bill Penfield, commended this prayer to me more than 35 years ago. It is still as spiritually relevant and helpful as when he directed me to pray it. I encourage you to use it also:

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN.