

Imagine the scene: the disciples sitting around, with their best ‘listening-to-a-sermon’ faces on, intently following every word that Jesus says. *“In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. ... 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*

All the rapt faces look at him and smile or nod, and behind those smiles, every one of them is thinking “???” And Thomas says “What are you talking about?” Good old Thomas. We don’t see much of him in the gospels, but when we do, he’s always the one asking the difficult questions.

I do sympathize with him here, because there are long passages in John’s gospel that strike me the same way: “What is he talking about?” You know the bits I mean: sentences where great heaps of pronouns and prepositions get all tangled up: “you in him, and he in us, and us in them” and so on. But like the disciples, I’m too polite, or maybe too cowardly, to admit that I’ve no idea what it means.

Thomas wasn’t held back by politeness, or convention, and he was certainly not a coward. In fact, he went on to become one of the greatest and most courageous saints of the Christian church. He devoted his life to spreading the word and he died for his faith – just like Stephen, whom we heard about in the first reading.

Thomas deserved better than to be remembered forever as Doubting Thomas. We have heard lately in our gospel readings how Thomas was ready to follow Jesus back to Bethany after Lazarus died, even though he had no idea why they should

take that risk. And we heard how he needed some evidence to help him commit to believing in the resurrection. Thomas was not asking the difficult questions because he didn't believe. His questions showed that he was working hard to understand. Doubts are normal and healthy; and people who don't have any doubts at all are really scary and very dangerous.

The only way to have no doubts is to close your mind, and people who think they have the answers, who refuse to question their beliefs, or their actions, are often willing to do anything at all to avoid having to ask the tough questions. One of my favourite prayers is from the Irish Archbishop Donald Caird: "Lord, keep me in the company of those who seek the truth and protect me from those who believe they have found it."

So what was Jesus talking about? "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.*" When we were children that passage was usually "many mansions" and we imagined enormous buildings up there in the clouds. Houses in heaven. Big, fancy houses in heaven. Big, fancy houses in heaven, inside other big, fancy houses in heaven.

As adults, we gave up trying to build that picture for ourselves, because it defies all logic. The Dutch artist Escher, who often painted completely impossible things, could probably do it, but the rest of us can't. So we stop trying and just accept that we understand the general idea, and that's good enough.

We know that getting bogged down in the literal meaning of specific words usually doesn't help with scripture. Clearly Jesus was not talking about simple bricks and mortar when talked about 'houses', 'dwelling places' and 'mansions.'

We know that the word ‘house’ can mean a building, or it can mean a group of people who belong together – like the House of Dior, or the House of Windsor. Ancient Greek (of course!) used two different words: *oikos* meant “a building in which people live,’ and that is NOT the word used here. The word used here is *oikia* which is not a building at all, but a group of people who belong together.

And this is something we understand well. When we say, for example, “St. George’s” we’re not usually thinking about the building; we are thinking instead of all the people who belong to its community, past, present and future, It is a place, but, more importantly, it’s a connection; it’s a fellowship.

The word ‘dwell’ is not very common these days, except in church, but we don’t have to look it up in a dictionary to know what it means. Roughly. It means ‘live in’, with overtones of safety, and peacefulness—sort of. And when it says ‘dwelling places’ in the gospel, we understand the same dimensions: a place to be, not in the sense of a building, but more like a safe and comfortable place, where you belong.

We all grew up with the King James Bible, which translates the word as ‘mansions’ instead of ‘dwelling places’, probably because they understood it differently 500 years ago. Everywhere else in the gospels, though, that same word is usually translated as ‘home.’ Whichever direction you come at it from, a “dwelling place” is not a building, it’s a connection; a fellowship.

It’s significant that the passage we read today takes place at the last supper. Jesus was preparing the disciples for his death. They had known him so far as a flesh and blood human being, and the flesh and blood person would soon be leaving

them, but the divine presence that was housed in that body would still be with them. The disciples were having trouble getting their heads around that idea – and don't we all! And yet, when someone we love dies, we know that the spirit that was contained in that body—the essence of the person that we loved, and who loved us—is still somehow with us and connected to us.

Perhaps the disciples were getting bogged down in bricks and mortar as well. In their day, when Jesus referred to “my Father's House” they would think of the magnificent building that was the great temple of Jerusalem. By the time John was writing his gospel, that temple didn't exist any more. It had been destroyed completely, just as Jesus said it would be. The building was gone, but the community, the connection, the fellowship that it represented, was still there.

On the night before the crucifixion, the disciples were still thinking bricks and mortar, but Jesus was talking about the greater structures of life and death. They didn't get it yet, but soon they would. He would be gone from them, but still connected to them. And us. For ever.

We may not be able to draw a picture of the ‘dwelling places’ or the ‘mansions’, but we get the idea. And, as one unknown sage put it, “Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.”

Amen.