

Prayer: O Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Way, the Truth and the Life: We pray that being kept by You we might never stray from You who is the Way, nor distrust You who is the Truth, nor to find our rest in any other thing than You, who is our Life. And as You have said to Philip, He who has seen Me has seen the Father, so open the eyes of our understanding that in You we might always behold the light of the knowledge and glory of God. We ask this in Your name, Amen.

In the Name of the One who is the revelation of God Himself, Dear Fellow Redeemed;

Our Gospel lesson is the beginning of an important section of John's Gospel, the section we often call the Upper Room Discourse. This is the conversation that Jesus has with His disciples on the night that He would be betrayed. They had eaten the Passover meal and would soon be going to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus would be arrested, and so Jesus takes this opportunity to give His disciples some words of warning, as well as words of comfort and encouragement. He warns His disciples that He would soon be separated from them, just as He does at the very beginning of our text. He also tells them they should not be troubled, or afraid, because despite appearances His arrest, His execution, even His departure after His resurrection; none of these are a setback or defeat, rather they are all part of the Father's plan of salvation. Jesus being taken away from them will allow Him to go and prepare a place for them and for all Christians so that they one day might be with Him and the Father in heaven.

As you can see, the disciples were not particularly comforted by this. They had spent the last three years with Jesus as His students, His disciples. And while the disciples had not always shown themselves to be model students, they had learned

quite a bit, they had come a long way. But now they are troubled by this talk of Jesus that makes it sound like that journey was ending. They misunderstood Jesus' talk about going away and coming back and "*You know the way to where I am going*" to mean that He would no longer be their Teacher; now it was time for them to walk the path on their own, as if Jesus was telling them He was going to run on ahead; they should put their learning to work now so they could one day catch up with Him. Hence Thomas' near panicky words, "*Lord, we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way?*" (St John 14:5)

We can see how worried they are, because not even Jesus' next words give them any comfort at first, "*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life....If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also*" (St John 14:6-7). They understood it not as words of comfort that Jesus would bring them to where He was going, but as a rebuke for not paying close enough attention during the past three years. So Philip decides to be helpful, tries to bridge the gap. "*Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us*" (St John 14:8). Just do this one more thing, this one little thing for us, says Philip, and then we'll have enough, then we'll be ready. It was a well-meaning request, but it is obvious from Jesus' response that it showed some lack of understanding on the part of Philip. Philip was looking on the teachings of Jesus as if they were a puzzle to be put together or a mystery to be solved, thinking that if Jesus would just give him that one missing piece or that one important clue, then Philip, and the rest of the disciples, would have enough to go on their own.

And this is a misunderstanding that persists in matters of religion and spirituality today. People involve themselves in religion because they are aware of the spiritual void in their lives, of the gap between them and God. And that void, that gap, is a very real thing; it is the result of the fall into sin. When Adam and Eve disobey God in the Garden of Eden, they effectively cut themselves off from God. God immediately responds by re-connecting Himself with them through the promise of a Savior, but one of the effects of sin is that it always feeds our doubt as to how serious God really is in His reconciliation with us. We have too much experience in this life with conditional reconciliation; of offending someone and being sincere in our apology and our wish to reconcile, only to have our apology accepted grudgingly; being told "I'll forgive you, but just this once." "I'll let it go this time, but do that again and its over." Sadly, we ourselves have been known to do the same to those who have offended us. And so when it comes to God and we recognize our imperfection, we feel guilt over our sin, and so no matter how firm God may be in His promise and His love for us, we tend to struggle with doubt.

And so we work to eliminate the doubt, to fill that void, but unfortunately we tend to go about this in the wrong way. We tackle our feelings of guilt and unworthiness by attempting to prove to ourselves that we are or that we can be worthy and deserving of the love of God. We search for ways to show God how worthy we are by trying to gain insight into the nature and being of God, in the hopes that if we better understand God, we can then work toward drawing closer to Him. We in essence look for teachers who can "show us the Father", and the teachers we look to are not always

Jesus. There are many religions in the world that will claim to explain God or lay out a spiritual path that will bring God closer to us, and we tend to be susceptible to their claims because they direct us back to ourselves and tell us what we need to do. That makes sense to us, because after all, if the guilt is here [inside me], it makes sense to us that the solution would be here [inside me] as well.

But the problem with this is that apart from Jesus, all such attempts are futile. Sadly, even with Jesus some attempts are futile because they make Jesus out to be only a teacher or a guide toward God. Even Christians are often guilty of understanding Jesus as essentially a stepping stone, or a rung on the ladder toward God. Philip himself shows this understanding when he asks Jesus to “show us the Father”, as if what needed to happen is Jesus needed to give them that one more bit of information, show them one more miracle, give one more experience and then, then they would be equipped for their spiritual journey.

But Christianity is not a religion of enlightenment, that focuses primarily on us and our behavior, which sets us on a path by which we learn to purify our flesh until we are cleansed of sin and guilt and make ourselves worthy of God. Nor is it a religion of enlightenment which gradually reveals knowledge about God and spiritual matters until we finally understand God.

When Thomas asked his question about “how can we know the way,” Jesus is very careful to say, “I am *the* Way.” He wished for Thomas, and the other disciples, and us as well to cast out of our minds any idea that Jesus somehow fills our backpack and canteen, gives us a roadmap and compass and sets us on the path, wishing us good luck.

He says, "I am the Way." To believe in Jesus and be connected to Him by faith is to be on the path to God.

Or perhaps we should say, "To be on the path with God," because Jesus does not bring us to God through some gradual process, but immediately. Hence Jesus' response to Philip, "*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know Me, Philip? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, Show us the Father'?*" (St John 14:9) To be connected to Jesus is to be connected to the Father, because as Jesus said elsewhere, "I and the Father are One." To be joined with Jesus in baptism is to be joined with God. Because in one sense it is true that Christianity is a religion of enlightenment, but our enlightenment comes from the fact that Jesus brings us out of darkness and makes us children of the light. Through baptism, Jesus cleanses us from sin and guilt and makes us worthy of the title "children of God"; in fact the Early Church used to call Baptism "Enlightenment" as a reminder that when it comes to the work of salvation, we are the passive recipients of God's grace. The separation between us and God isn't closed by us, but by God, and by God alone. When Jesus said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," the disciples had the picture (and may still have the picture today) of a path upon which one walks. But a better picture is one of a moving sidewalk. Jesus is the way. Baptism puts us on the way, and we are brought to heaven, brought to the Father. Not through our efforts, but because Jesus, the Way, the moving sidewalk, brings us to God. In Jesus we find reconciliation with God, which in turn allows us to grant unconditional forgiveness and true reconciliation to those who have offended us. It

fulfills the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

You probably noticed in your worship folder that May 1 is the day the Church sets aside to remember St. Philip and St. James. We don't know a whole lot about Philip, except that he is mentioned twice in the New Testament; one of those times is here in John 14, which is probably one of the reasons this is the Gospel lesson today. We know even less about St. James; except that he is the "other" James, the one who is not the brother of John. Ironically, he is often referred to as James the Less or James the Younger. The fact that we know so little about either one is probably why they are forced to share a day when we remember them.

And this is probably just the way St. Philip and St. James would like it: Ignorant about them, but full of knowledge about Jesus and His forgiveness.

Gloria Patri...

SDG