

1 Peter 2:2-10, 15-16; John 14:1-14

Many dwelling places in Christ

Happy Mother's day! - to all the mothers in New Zealand, Korea and the rest of the world, we express our gratitude for their love and care for all children. Every living person is born of a mother by whom we are cared, nurtured, and protected. Mothers are also a symbol of safe space to which we'd like to return for security and continuity of life. Apart from our physical mothers, we Christians find this safe place in Christ, namely 'many dwelling places in the Father's house', which is our main focus today. We'll see what these dwelling places in the Father's house are, how they are prepared, and for whom these dwelling places be.

1. The dwelling places¹ in the Father's house

In John 14:2, Jesus promises the disciples dwelling places in the Father's house. On hearing this, they are surprised and bewildered as Jesus is bidding them farewell.² For the disciples, it is inconceivable that Jesus is saying to them about his impending death. They are also bewildered as the fellowship with Jesus will continue after this. For them, it doesn't just make sense.

As read, vv 2-3 speaks of a location: a place, my Father's house, many dwelling places (NRSV).³ It also includes movements – a here and a there, a going and a coming. The word 'dwelling places' (μονή - monē dwelling, lodging; stay) is a word which explains the relationship between Jesus and God, and Jesus and his disciples. This relationship is often described as 'abiding in Christ', which is one of the important experiences of believers (15:1-11). For example, Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."⁴ We'll find its meaning through the word – dwelling places.

'Dwelling places' is a different expression of 'abiding in Christ.' The word 'dwelling place' – (μονή - monē) has the meaning of actions of living and a place to live. This word is translated in different words such as 'rooms' (ESV, NIV) or 'many mansions' (KJV, ASV). Rooms and mansions are primarily about a place or space to live. They lack for such movements or actions of living. Besides, Jesus offers it first as a way of continuing the fellowship with his disciples. In these dwelling places, the security of the divine presence is promised (14:3b: 'that where I am, there you may be also). It is also given to them as it cannot be found by searching for it. Also going there begins from knowing who Christ is. All are included in the preparation of the dwelling places.

2. Preparation of the dwelling places

In 1 Peter 2:2-10, Peter invites the fellow believers to come to the living stone – Jesus Christ. Then – he continues, Christ transforms them into living stones to be built into the spiritual house.⁵ This process is how we become the household of God.⁶ When we look into it, between these two movements – coming to the living stone and becoming the household of God, there is individuals' faith journey. And this faith journey is part of the preparation of the dwelling places. It is because the dwelling places are not found in the sky, or deep in the sea, but it is in each believer. To come to the living stone, one has to overcome certain things as Paul says.

¹ John 14:2

ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου μοναὶ πολλαὶ εἰσιν· εἰ δὲ μὴ, εἶπον ἅν ὑμῖν ὅτι πορεύομαι ἔτοιμάσαι τόπον ὑμῖν;

² John 14:1-14

³ In other versions, it is translated as 'many rooms' (ESV, NIV), or 'many mansions' (KJV, ASV)

⁴ John 15:4

⁵ 1 Peter 2:4 – 5 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁶ 1 Peter 4:17 For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it starts with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

“Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— (6) yet for us, there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”⁷

It is a remarkable faith statement because Paul says that Jesus Christ is the only way, no one else. If someone asks us how we know this, we can only answer to the person like this – ‘it is by grace.’ We may often encounter such questions by others who don’t have faith in Jesus Christ. Even though we are not able to answer back to such questions eloquently with sound reasoning, that’s fine because we are not supposed to explain every single piece in the bible. We often observe similar things in the world. For example, scientists say that we only understand about four per cent of the matter in the universe. The rest of the universe is called 'dark matter', and we don't know what it is.⁸ All these things – challenges, contemplation, wrestling with questions about God and all are counted in the course of becoming the living stones.

Second, coming to the living stone means that we obtain a new identity. Just imagine what it was like for those in the house churches who heard this letter for the first time. Obtaining a new identity by becoming the household of God is an extraordinary event. There will be no longer outcasts, marginalized by their social condition. They even can do greater work than Jesus did.⁹

Third, this household is different from a social club which exists solely for the needs of its members. Things are working differently in this household. The members of this household begin to be transformed into another dwelling places for that outside of this household. This process is not easy. Many things that the old identity may have accumulated for years have to go. And new tasks are given to this newly obtained holy priesthood.¹⁰

3. *The dwelling places for Christ*

1 Peter 2:9 describes that the household of God is a chosen race and a royal priesthood. They can proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into this marvellous light. They do such work through prayers to God in Jesus’ name. Jesus pledges the disciples that their prayers will be answered.¹¹ It is not to give to overly indulgent children whatever their hearts fancy. Rather prayers in Jesus’ name means that they are to be made out of the disciples’ relationship established with and by Jesus. The answering of the requests does not serve those who pray. But it is to the end 'that the Father may be glorified in the Son.' These are prayers offered on behalf of the community and the community's mission. They undergird the ‘greater works’ that the church is to perform.

In our storytime, we heard the story of the green frog who didn't listen. The question was, 'where is a safe room in this story?' What's your answer? In the story, the mother frog cannot trust her son, so she instructs him to bury her on the bank of the river. The son frog, for the first time, listens to her. So whenever it rains hard, the son frog is adamant about watching the grave if it is being swept away by rising water. What is a safe room/place here? Can we find it in the son frog’s regret, his memory about his beloved mother and ongoing repentance? We know that he becomes a different frog now. Maybe a safe place can be found in this ‘new’ frog which is him now.

This simple allegory allows us room to expand our imagination to live as living stones, a holy priesthood and dwelling places for others. It is not easy but we are trying to live it not because we are perfect, but we are told that God cares for even small and trivial things too. In the end, it is not us to see the whole tapestry of salvation, but God. Our reward is to hear this - ‘well done, good and trustworthy children...enter into the joy of your Father.’¹² We will say ‘Amen’ to that!

⁷ 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

⁸ Richard Panek, "The 4 Percent Universe" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011)

⁹ John 14:12 - Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 2:5

¹¹ 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24

¹² Matthew 25:23