

Hy 31:1,2  
Ps 17:3,4  
Ps 84:1,2  
Ps 27:2  
Hy 55:1,2  
John 13:21-14:14  
Ezekiel 41:5-11  
1 Peter 1:1-5  
John 14:2b

Yarrow, May 16, 2010

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

This past Thursday marked 40 days after Easter, and that makes it the day, on the church calendar, of Jesus' ascension into heaven. His ascension directs our thoughts to a passage of Scripture as John 14, for we think of Jesus having gone to heaven to "prepare a place for" us. And truth be said, it's a thought we like. That Jesus would have gone to heaven to get things ready for our coming – yes, in the strife and struggle of this earthly life we like the thought.

We find, though, that it takes a long time for Jesus to "prepare a place" for us. He's been gone for many years already –nearly two-thousand– and He still hasn't returned. It makes us wonder: is it that big a job to prepare some rooms for us? What's this preparing of rooms actually all about??

It turns out, brothers and sisters, that this passage is rather misunderstood. For the preparation is already done. The result is that we have *free access today* to the rooms in the Father's house.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **JESUS HAS PREPARED A PLACE FOR US IN THE HOUSE OF HIS FATHER.**

1. The Meaning of the Promise
2. The Trigger for the Promise
3. The Comfort of the Promise

### ***1. The Meaning of the Promise***

It's clear that Jesus is speaking in our text to His disciples. How, then, did these disciples understand Jesus' pledge about going to prepare a place for them?

The phrase "My Father's house" occurs one other time in the gospel according to John, and then distinctly with reference to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> That's John 2, when Jesus drove the businessmen with their animals out of the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers. He then said: "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise" (2:16). "My Father's house": that's obviously the temple standing in Jerusalem, a place very well known to the disciples. In fact, that this temple was called God's 'house' was standard in the Old Testament.

That temple: it had first been built by King Solomon. The inside of that temple, we know, consisted of the Holy of Holies in the back and the Holy Place in the front, and a courtyard around the building itself where the people could come, and at the doors of the temple the big altar of burnt

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<sup>1</sup> See JP Versteeg, *Hoger Onderwijs* (Kampen: Kok, 1987), pg 43f.

offering where sacrifices were made for sin. In this regard the temple Solomon was built was modeled on the structure of the tabernacle God had commanded Moses to build at Mt Sinai.

But we need to note that Solomon *added* something to the temple that was not present in the tabernacle. I read in 1 Kings 6:5 that “against the walls of the main hall and inner sanctuary [Solomon] built a structure around the building, in which there were side rooms.” Rooms around the side: we’re not told how many Solomon built around the temple, but we are told their size; they were 2 ½ to 3 ½ meters wide by 2 ½ meters high (say, the size of a modern bedroom) , and they were built three stories on top of each other (1 Kings 6:6). One wonders why he had these rooms added.

That question becomes more pressing when we follow the history of the temple. Solomon’s temple was, we know, destroyed by the Babylonians when the people of Israel were taken into exile. In exile the prophet Ezekiel received a vision of a new temple. And see: this temple as Ezekiel sees it also has *many rooms*. We read it: the prophet speaks of rooms all around the outside wall of the temple, three stories high. We’re even told the number of rooms: there were thirty per floor on the one side of the temple, and again thirty per floor (three floors!) on the other side (Ezek 41:5ff). Including the rooms at the back of the temple, then, we’re looking at more than 200 rooms altogether.

Now, we read that, and then think of the hotels available in the world’s cities, and come away thinking that this isn’t anything special because some hotels have literally thousands of rooms. Fair enough. But remember the sort of construction that happened in the days of Ezekiel. A building with 200 rooms was *enormous*, certainly meant *something*.

The temple Ezekiel saw in his vision was not –indeed, could not– be physically built; this was a vision. But when the exiles returned to Jerusalem they did set about building a new temple under the leadership of men as Haggai and Zechariah. According to sources outside the Bible, the rebuilt temple (though not as glorious as Solomon’s temple had been) also had many rooms built around it too<sup>2</sup> – and this was the temple the disciples knew well.

And again the question is: *why?* What was the function of these rooms?? Who used them?? That question becomes the more pressing when we discover that the Old Testament does not tell us how the rooms were used! Some commentators suggest they were for storage....

To help answer the question, we need, congregation, to think back to the tabernacle God commanded Israel to build in the desert. You’ll recall that the tabernacle was built to be a dwelling place for God amongst His people. Yet the people could get no closer than the Outer Court, and between the people and God in the Holy of Holies was the altar. Only the High Priest could enter the presence of God Himself in the Holy of Holies – and then but once a year, on the Day of Atonement, provided he had blood from the sacrifice with him (cf Lev 16). That the temple was God’s dwelling place among His people was wonderful, but His people *could not dwell with Him* in that house, could not because of *sin*. It was a dwelling place for God alone; sin meant *distance*.

The godly in Israel were grateful for God’s presence in their midst. But the Holy Spirit moved David, for example, to want more. Think of what he said in Ps 27: “One thing,” said he, “I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: That I may dwell *in* the house of the Lord all the days of my life” (vs 4). In that desire which the Spirit placed in David’s heart lay a prophecy for the people: one day they *would* dwell in God’s house, in God’s presence!

So when this same David sat down to draft plans for what the temple ought to look like, the Holy Spirit had him include side rooms in his plans. That’s 1 Chronicles 28: “David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms and the place of atonement. He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for

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<sup>2</sup> As to the temple standing in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day, it appears that here too were numerous side chambers. See Edersheim, *The Temple: its Ministry and Service* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 50ff.

the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms..." (vss 11f). And Solomon dutifully built a temple according to the heavenly blue print received from his father David.

How marvellous! Because of sin the law of God forbade the people of Israel from entering the temple itself, let alone living in those rooms in God's nearness. But the fact that rooms were built around the temple –upon command of God Himself– was wonderful *prophecy* that one day sinful people could actually dwell with God in His house. So the choirs in Solomon's temple could sing about the longing of the godly to dwell in the temple itself, to live with God. Listen to the song of the Sons of Korah in Ps 84: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself ... – a place near your altar," perhaps in one of those side rooms.... A song as that kept alive the hope and wish of the godly in Israel: one day we shall dwell with God in His house! That, we understand, was the delightful message of the vision Ezekiel saw. This temple has *many rooms*, and that's prophetic of what shall be: many people living with God in one house!

Now Jesus says to His disciples: "I go to prepare a place for you." In context, that has to be a reference to those "many rooms" in His Father's house, those side rooms in the temple of Jerusalem. Whereas the disciples had no access to the house of God –the temple itself– because of sin, Jesus would prepare a place, open those rooms, for the disciples. How marvellous: sinful disciples in the presence of God!! How Jesus would do this?<sup>3</sup> We understand: He's going to take sin away and so make dwelling with God possible for sinners. Jesus is going away, is going *to the cross*; more, Jesus is going away, is going to present Himself to His Father as *the sacrifice* for sin. "Lamb of God" He was, come to take away the sin of the world. Himself the Priest and Himself the Victim, and so He would gain entry for His people into the dwelling of God! That He goes to "prepare a place" does not describe first of all His ascension into heaven and what He may be busy doing in heaven (making the beds?), but describes first of all His work on the cross of Calvary.

And on the cross He was successful. Through the shedding of His blood He reconciled sinners to God. As a result the curtain of the temple was torn, from top to bottom (Mt 27:51). That is: the dividing line between God and man was broken away, the barrier removed. So it was possible on Pentecost Day for the ascended Christ to pour out His Holy Spirit upon His own, and so to fulfil the word Jesus spoke in John 14:23: "My Father [and I] ... will come ... and make our home with [the believers]." "Home": there's the same word as appears in vs 2, where our translation speaks of many "rooms". The point is that God dwells with man, and so sinful man may dwell with God – how delightful the gospel!

We understand: the promise is wonderful. But it needs more colour. In what circumstance did Jesus mention this promise? What was the trigger for His speech of John 14?? How does this promise touch the ground on which we're standing? That's our second point:

## ***2. The Trigger for the Promise***

Jesus' words about going to prepare a place for the disciples in His Father's house were spoken in response to the anxiety that gripped the hearts of the disciples. That's vs 1: Jesus' instruction to His disciples not to let their hearts be troubled tells us that the disciples around Jesus were in a knot; they were confused, troubled, their world was in shambles. Why? The answer lies in the verses we read from chap 13.

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<sup>3</sup> See here C vanderWaal, *Commentaar op het Evangelie naar Johannes* (Goes: Oosterbaan & leCointre, 1984), pg 147f.

Jesus and His disciples had gone to the upper room for the Passover meal (13:1). Somewhere in the course of the meal, Jesus spoke the words of vs 21: “Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.” We can quite understand the reaction of the disciples: they were taken aback, perplexed, puzzled. All twelve had been following Jesus for some three years, all preached in His name, cast out demons, healed the sick.... They all knew each other well, understood each other...; would one of them actually do such a low thing?! So Peter beckoned to John to please ask Jesus who this would be.... It turns out to be Judas Iscariot, the group’s treasurer. With the charge to ‘Go, do what you plan’, Jesus dismissed the traitor. We can appreciate that the remaining eleven need some moments to digest such a revelation.

To add to their sense that their world was falling apart around them, Jesus candidly told the remaining eleven: “I shall be with you a little while longer” (13:33). That is to say: Jesus would go away. And, as He had told the Jews previously, the disciples would not be able to follow Him, would not be able to find Him. He would be gone, would disappear....

Peter was the first to betray the confusion in the minds of the disciples. He was emphatic; he would follow the Lord any where in the world (cf Jn 7:35f), would even give up his life for Him. No way did Peter want to be without His Lord and Master! “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for Your sake!” We understand the pain, the confusion.... And now take Jesus’ response: “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times” (vs 38).

How shocking! Judas gone, Jesus leaving, Peter shall go through his knees.... What’s left of all that Jesus taught over the years? Wasn’t Jesus going to establish the kingdom of God in Israel? Hadn’t He spoken of reconciling sinners to God? What’s the future to bring?! With such terrible words as chap 13 contains, there’s no future, no hope, no perspective.... Hence the anxiety, the troubled hearts of 14:1....

We realize: this is a snapshot of a particular moment in history, a moment that can never be repeated. Yet there is something so familiar in the atmosphere of the moment. Who of us has not experienced in some way that one we trusted and loved has betrayed us? Who has not experienced that a person you esteem has suddenly walked off the stage, out of your life – and you feel as if you’re left in the lurch, on your own?? My point: the confusion and hurt described in the closing verses of John 13 are not at all unique; we all can relate in some way to this sense of hurt and anxiety. And we fully realize that this sort of thing can happen to any of us at any time.

That is why, congregation, Jesus’ words in John 14 do not touch only the disciples. Certainly, it was *their* hearts (vs 1) that were troubled, and it was *these disciples* that Jesus sought to comfort with His promise of His going to prepare a place for them in the Father’s house. In *their* pain and confusion they are comforted indeed with the good news that Jesus is going away *for a very good purpose*, and the purpose is that He might prepare for sinners *like Peter* the possibility of living in God’s very presence – and that’s to say that He’s going away in order to reconcile sinners to God; He’s going to the cross. Glorious gospel for Peter, and for Andrew and for James and for Thomas and for the rest!! Balm for troubled hearts indeed; they get, like the sparrows, to live *in God’s house and presence!!*

But putting it that way, congregation, makes it clear how we are to work with this text ourselves. Things around us fall apart as friends disappoint us. We have our days when even the Lord God seems so far away..., and we feel so totally alone.... Here’s now the force of Jesus’ instruction: in days of darkness and loneliness and trouble He says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” That’s not a piece of wholesome advice, but it’s a *command*: “do not let your hearts be troubled.” Not your emotions are to rule over you, but you are to rule over your emotions (according to God’s instruction in Genesis 1:26ff). And why is my heart never to be troubled?? The reason is that Jesus Christ has

gone to the cross to prepare a place for me in the Father's house, a room in the presence of God Himself for me!! What keeps me away from God –sin!– has been taken away!

Hence our third point:

### ***3. The comfort of the promise***

Yes, we live on earth, in this life, in houses of timber and drywall, where people actually disappoint and hurt us, and where God sometimes seems so far away. How are we to understand ourselves living in a room in the temple of God, in Father's house??

The temple standing in Jerusalem in the time of John 14, congregation, was itself a representation of how things were *in heaven*, in the presence of God. Remember that before the fall into sin there was open and free communication between God and man, for God habitually came to man in the Garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). But with the fall into sin the Lord exiled Adam and Eve –and so the entire human race– from His presence. Then Yes, it certainly was wonderful that the Lord established His covenant of grace with Israel and came to dwell in their midst in the tabernacle. But distance remained, as was driven home to the people by the fact that they could not enter the tabernacle. But that's not how God wanted it to be, and that was foreshadowed by the addition of the empty rooms in the Old Testament temple. In the fullness of time God gave His Son to reconcile sinners to God, and Christ on the cross in fact atoned for sin. And then?? Listen to what the author of Hebrews writes: "Christ has...entered...into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God *for us*..." (9:26). We understand: that's Jesus' ascension into heaven. The same author to the Hebrews draws out the blessed consequence: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus..., let *us* draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith..." (10:19ff). Draw near to what? To who? That's clear: *to God!* Hebrews 12: "we have come to Mt Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem..., to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant" (vss 22ff).

The point? Because of Jesus' work on the cross we have access to the presence of God. More, because of His ascension into heaven, we get to follow Jesus into the Father's house in heaven, get to dwell with God in His presence! In other words: the rooms in heaven are open for you!

How you enter those rooms?? That's prayer, that's speaking with God in the midst of life's turmoil and confusion. You live with God, and God lives with you – this is the wonderful fruit of Christ's going away on Good Friday to prepare a place for the disciples and for all who share their faith. God's presence, God's house, is not *verboden* for you; the doors to His house are *open* for all who call upon Him in truth!

The naked eye does not see this wealth yet; for now the child of God believes it, and delights in the privileges of being in Father's house. But soon the dwelling of God will descend from heaven to earth, and that's to say that God Himself will be with people. John tells us that this dwelling will be enormous, with room for all who are washed in Jesus' blood. In fact, says John when he saw the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, "I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (vs 22). No temple, and therefore no side rooms, for there's a constant intermingling of God with man and people with God; here is perfectly fulfilled the cry of the psalmist to dwell in God's very presence itself. God and man together, with no hindrance of sin; God and man together, as it used to be in Paradise. There's the fullness of the prophecy of our text: "that where I am, there you may be also."

How comforting, how very comforting this word was for the eleven in the room with Jesus! With Judas' disclosure as a traitor, and Peter's exposure as a liar, and Jesus' own plan to depart, the future looked so gloomy, so very gloomy. How bright, then, the splendour of Jesus' promise! A place

in the temple, in the presence of God: who could wish for more! Small wonder that Peter in his letter sings out his excitement:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...” (I Pet 1:3f).

Gone the gloom, and alive the hope, the perspective of that which awaits the chosen of God! That room in Father’s house: it’s ready, ready for Peter and ready for all who believe in Jesus Christ. It’s prepared already, and now awaits the day when God takes His own to Himself through death or the Day when He comes to us in the New Jerusalem. It’s prepared, a glorious inheritance kept in heaven for us, and today already those who shall dwell in the presence of God enjoy a foretaste in its splendour – in the Spirit the Father and the Son dwell already in the hearts of His own.

Despair? Be troubled? No, Peter, no, disciples, NO, brothers and sisters! For the Saviour said He would “go to prepare a place,” and that’s what He did. That place is now ready for you, access to the Father has been gained. Already you may speak freely to your Creator and Redeemer, and the Saviour intercedes on your behalf to make your sin-filled petitions and praise acceptable to holy God. And soon the Saviour will come again, and you’ll see your heavenly Father face to face.