

Greater works than Christ's: John 14:1-14

## **Calling the roll is easier than following the leader.**

by [William Brosend](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

What has the Gospel of John given us, and what are we to do with it? Working from end to beginning we must, at a minimum, account for such contested verses as these:

- “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it” (14:14).
- “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” (14:12).
- “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).
- “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied’” (14:8).
- “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (14:6).
- “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. . . . I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (14:1-3).

Listening to these claims reminds me of Annie Dillard saying that we should wear crash helmets when sitting in the pew (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*).

In many ways it is a matter of emphasis. Do we emphasize “ask me for anything and I will do it” or “the one who believes in me will do greater works than these”? Do we emphasize “show us the Father” or “whoever has seen me has seen the Father”? Do we emphasize “in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places” or “where I am, there you may be also”? Last but not least, do we emphasize “I am the way, the truth, and the life” or “no one comes to the Father except through me”?

Most of the time, God help us, we emphasize the wrong thing:

- what's in it for me, not what I can do
- the search for incontrovertible confirmation, not trust in what we have already seen
- wondering what our room in heaven will look like, not enjoying Christ's presence with us each day
- trying to decide who is in and who is out, rather than following the path of the One who is the Way

Other than that, we're doing pretty well!

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" Why do we hear that as a perilous affirmation fraught with exclusion rather than a suggestion of the right path for Thomas and the disciples, with us as present company included? Could it have anything to do with the fact that calling the roll is easier than following the leader?

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. . . . 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." The Greek is plural, so who is "you"? Are there only some folk whose hearts Jesus wished to calm, only a niche group invited to faith in God? And if the answer to that is a resounding No! then why do we persist in thinking that the divine accommodations will be limited and segregated?

"Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'" How does the old joke go? The philandering husband denies that anything is happening by asking, "Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?" Do we believe what we see, or do we join Philip in wanting just a little more? OK, not a little more: we want the whole thing. We want to see God too. Is that so bad? Maybe, maybe not. But to recall the wonderful Joan Osborne song, "What if God was one of us?" What if the evidence is less spectacular than Philip and we might prefer? If God is present in creation, in the daily miracles of human love and compassion, in the hopes and aspirations of all who seek after God, can we see God? "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" Hey, Philip, this is as good as it gets!

Maybe we had all better look again, and this time as if we mean it.

We make progress, backing off a little on the whole exclusivity issue, and deciding to attend not only to the spectacular but to all the evidence around us. But then we slam into “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” Here we really get off track. We wonder what we should ask for since Jesus says he will do anything, skipping over the fact that Jesus talks about what we can do ourselves—greater works than his own.

Greater works than his own. OK, we start with a slight handicap, but we have been given the Spirit, so . . . I get it. Jesus is kidding. Except Jesus never kids in the fourth Gospel. Irony, sarcasm and metaphor abound, but not humor. Greater works than these? Maybe we need to read ahead a bit. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:13-14). Jesus laid down his life for us, his friends. So what is our “greater” work? To do what he commanded. How does that commandment go? “Love one another as I have loved you.” Is that so hard to remember?