

20140518FifthSundayOfEaster

There is one verse that leaps out of this morning's Gospel because it is so well known and unfortunately abused. It is a verse upon which many base their whole Christianity. It becomes the touchstone for faith in ourselves but more disastrously when we use it to judge and exclude others. I wonder if you've guessed the verse I'm talking about? John 14:6 - ⁶*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* But like all biblical verses we need to see it in context of when it was said and why it was said.

What we are hearing in this morning's Gospel reading is the start of a very long and yet exquisitely beautiful goodbye from a teacher who is wrapping things up, in a sense, with reminders and coaxings and reassurances to his much-loved but rather weak disciples.

These final teachings of Jesus in John's Gospel are known as his Final Discourse. They are four long chapters of not-easy theological discussion with lots of play-on-words such as ³*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 ¹¹*Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.* By the time I've read this passage I'm wondering who is in whom and who is on the outside! These chapters all need to be prayerfully meditated upon before we throw up our hands and give up.

Generally the Final discourse is seen as having three distinct parts. First, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be going away to the Father, that he will send the Holy Spirit to guide the disciples. This is where our Gospel today and in fact next week's is taken from.

The next part of the discourse contains the allegory of The Vine, where Jesus describes himself as the vine (the source of life for the community) and the disciples as the branches. This builds on the pattern of discipleship John taught in his gospel. Jesus also warns the disciples of upcoming persecutions: *"If the world hates you, remember that they hated me before you"*.

The final part of the discourse (John 17:1-26) is Jesus' prayers for his followers and the soon-to-be-formed church. This is the longest prayer of Jesus in any of the gospels, and is known as the High Priestly Prayer. The key themes of the prayer are the glorification of the Father and petitions for the unity of the disciples through love. Jesus prays to the Father that his followers *"may all be one as we are one"* and that *"the love with which you love me may be in them, and I in them."*

Farewell Speeches are fairly common in the Hebrew Scriptures. We find them in Genesis 49; Joshua 22-24; I Chronicles 28-29, and the entire book of Deuteronomy. We have Jacob, Joshua, David and Moses before their death instructing and encouraging their family and followers. Jesus is doing much the same thing with his followers before his death: speaking not only to those present but to those who would come long after, including us today.

The farewell speech in John is a long one and brings into sharp focus the theology of John's Gospel. I'm sure this is the case because John wants to ensure that we get the message. It is into **this** context of a farewell speech that we must examine that famous verse – v6 *'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* but we must do so in the totality of the Gospel reading and perhaps the total final discourse as well.

We should go back to the beginning of the long evening before Jesus' death. John begins chapter 13 with Jesus' awareness that *"his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father."* Here is the key to what was in the heart of Jesus because in that very same verse he says: *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* This farewell speech, in a sense, is a love letter to his disciples and to us. Henri Nouwen put it well when he wrote urging us to *"love Jesus, and love the way Jesus loved."* [Rpt]

The evening had been disrupted by the drama of Judas' betrayal, but it also began with Jesus' teaching by example before beginning this long speech: he washes their feet and tells them to be humble servants. What was the vibe in that upper-room that night? Chapter 13 tells us about the anxiety in the disciples, and we hear Simon Peter and Thomas trying to make sense of it all.

So throughout the entire speech, Jesus reassures them with words of love and care and promise. However, we usually don't hear about the love, care, and promise as much as the claim of that ubiquitous verse 6. It can of course

be interpreted in different ways. Some say it is proof positive that only Christians can come close to God and that people of any and all other faiths are condemned. Those who think this way are generally called exclusivists.

At the other end there are those who turn away from the Good News because they feel that this verse makes it sound exclusionary and narrow-minded. They fervently believe that all religions bring salvation. They are known as Pluralists. Can't there be a middle road here? There is, and usually those who follow this middle road are referred to as Inclusivists.

But what was the idea behind this verse that Jesus was trying to make in this context? *No one comes to the Father except through me.* When Jesus says 'no one,' he means 'none of you'.... This is a text addressed to Jesus' hearers, the insiders, his disciples. It is not addressed to outsiders, the crowd and those following other Gods. It is not, as is the case in our twentieth century interpretation, a sweeping claim from Christianity to the other major world religions.

Those disciples, those insiders, had discovered already and will discover even more so in the about-to-be-formed church that this understanding of the truth of God carries with it a great price. Their faith had resulted in them being expelled from what they saw as their faith home, so they would have to carve out a new religious home for themselves, as a distinct people, and John's Gospel expresses the distinctiveness of Christians who find their way to God through Jesus. The way, the truth and the life.

The disciples' expulsion from the synagogues, their excommunication deprived them of a community and a place that was dear to them. It made them question whether they really could meet God anywhere else besides the temple and the synagogues. The synagogue, after all, represented God's chosen community. So here Jesus assures his disciples and through them all subsequent generations of believers: *"If you know me, you will know my Father also."* If one has met Jesus, one has met the Father.

But Philip still doesn't get it. He asks Jesus to *"show us the Father"*. This must have been particularly disappointing to the historical, earthly Jesus. All the way through John, Philip is mentioned assisting, believing, questioning, responding. Jesus himself called Philip to be a follower, and he in turn brought Nathanael to Jesus. When faced with a hungry multitude, Jesus turned to Philip and asked him how they could be fed (Jn 6). When curious Greeks wanted to meet and talk with Jesus, they approached Philip to intercede on their behalf (Jn 12). Only against this background can one appreciate Jesus' disappointment: *"You still do not know me!?"* Philip's failure provides Jesus with the opportunity to point to the future successes of his followers: *"The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..."* (Jn 14:12).

The works of Jesus are the works of God: to give life, and to restore meaning to life or enrich life's meaning. Already at creation God called us to take stewardship over evolution ("to till the garden and keep it," Gen 1:26-28). This is our challenge to engage in life-giving activities rather than death-dealing ones. Including rather excluding; welcoming rather than judging and rejecting. This is our challenge to put meaning into life rather than suck it out.

What we heard read as our Gospel this morning is Jesus last will and testament. He is urging his followers to put meaning into life out of their love for others. Jesus has presented himself as the authentic vision of existence – *the way, the truth, the life*. Believers can only echo Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).

Prayer:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a way as gives us breath;

Such a truth as ends all strife,

Such a life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

Such a light as shows a feast,

Such a feast as mends in length,

Such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:

Such a joy as none can move,

Such a love as none can part,

Such a heart as joys in love.