



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, May 10, 2020

Scripture Passages: 1st Peter 2: 2-10 & John 14:1-14

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

These first words in our Gospel are beloved. So very beloved. They are said and sung particularly at funerals as being some of the most comforting in our scriptures.

And they speak to a truth; the very hard truth of death – the separation from our loved one is very hard to bear. We miss a loved one's smile, or the sound of their voice. We miss nearness and touch. We miss shared experience and history: laughter, tears, joy and sorrow. In a time when we aren't able to hold funerals out of safety for each other – those pastoral rites that allow us to formally express our grief at this separation -- and our faith in the hope of the resurrection - we now take even more comfort in the promise of these words that we will meet again in the House of the Lord one day.

Separation is hard. We're learning so much about it right now aren't we? The times are teaching us that there are effects that we have to manage: for instance there's a neutrality to our emotional lives when we're separated – we are learning that joy – and pain – are shared. The times are teaching us that we are all perhaps not grieving the death of a loved one, but we are grieving the separation we are feeling from our friends and families and communities. I think I'm right in saying that we will never take presence for granted ever again.

So perhaps we are in a particularly sensitive frame of mind as we hear Jesus' conversation with his followers?

These lines from the Gospel of John come from part of what biblical scholars call the farewell discourse. So that's just a scholarly name for the long passages of final things Jesus wants to tell the disciples before he was arrested and tortured and killed. They're important chapters in the Gospel of John. And if you listen carefully, what you hear is Jesus is talking about relationship – about how much he loves the disciples and wants to care for them.

But he's speaking reassurance to an anxious bunch of people so it's hard for them to hear him.

I know I can readily understand the disciples' fear and sorrow and confusion as he tells them he's leaving them. After all, they love him and they've already learned and experienced so much with him -- and sacrificed a lot to follow him. He's changed their lives pretty fundamentally, and now he tells them he's leaving?

He begins by trying to reassure them by saying that he is not leaving them for good. But only for a time. And then he gives them a vision – the House of God that has many rooms for all who believe and follow the Way.

Now I've heard different explanations for this beautiful image of the House of God – ranging from this being a description of the Temple in Jerusalem with the equivalent of its clergy housing gathered around it – suggesting that Jesus was gathering the disciples to him and getting them ready for a mission as his followers (I think that's an interesting idea) to the more traditional reading that Jesus was describing their and our, ultimate destination - to be with God.

On the whole I'm actually inclined to credit both readings because of what Jesus says next. Because he does welcome the disciples – and all who believe - to his mission in the world – in the here and now.

But as I say, they're anxious so the disciples react to this image in a way that many of us can understand and sympathize with. It's a beautiful vision but he's still leaving so they ask questions. I get that. That's how I respond to stress and anxiety too. It's natural to want answers. It's natural to crave information.

So he gives them the information they need although it may not be what they want. That's the way with Jesus quite often. He tells them that the way to the Father, is through him: it's through following him, trusting in him, believing in him. In this way they will also be one with the Father as the Father and Jesus are one. They can remember him and be in union with Jesus as they accomplish the Father's will.

Because that really is the whole point to Jesus: God, in great love for us, sent his son among us so that Jesus could show us what God's love looks and feels like – so that we could experience that - and how that love could transform the world. Jesus is the way.

And along that way he heals, he forgives, he challenges and he loves fiercely. And he prods us – even provokes us to reinterpret all that we know of our religion according to the law of God's love. He challenged us to read scripture and to live it out according to the most loving interpretation possible even if doing that requires sacrifice on our part.

That too is part of this getting to know the Father. This is the way scripture is to be read – the most expansive, loving and generous way possible. Jesus taught us that.

Jesus is the Truth.

And how are we to live as believers? Again that's pretty clear according to Jesus' example: with forgiveness, moving through this world doing justice with loving intent. Being a disciple of Jesus is a holistic enterprise – not a merely a philosophy. It's embodied and enacted and it demands A LOT of us.

But the Christian life gives life too. It's not just that we embrace a way of thinking and acting and believing, Christ lives in us. Christ then makes his home in our hearts and begins to direct our actions and thoughts. Jesus is the life.

So Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life.

But Philip is not yet convinced. And again, I get that. The disciples are being asked for so much. It's natural that they should want some more evidence that Jesus is who he says he is. So Philip demands more – show us the Father.

I love how the translation or paraphrase The Message puts these lines as Jesus responds to him:

“You've been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don't understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, 'Where is the Father?' Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren't mere words. I don't just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act.

“Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can't believe that, believe what you see—these works.

He is one with the Father. You want to know what the Father feels about us? Look at Jesus. You want to know how the Father feels about us, look at Jesus.

It is in the character of God to heal – and so Jesus healed – he restored sight, and health, and sanity.

It is in the character of God to forgive – and so Jesus forgave our worst excesses and weaknesses.

It is in the character of God to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and take care of the poor, so he did all of that.

It is in the character of God to love the widow and the orphan and to include them intentionally in the promises of God and to not allow them to be marginalized – and Jesus enacted that character with love.

It's in the character of God to have the patience, to come among us and teach us all this – and so Jesus taught.

And it's in the character of God – to give up God's life for us – and so Jesus died.

And the fact that he rose again is proof that what God feels for us – is more love and mercy than we can ever truly understand.

Because of all that, as believers, and followers of the way, we orient our ministries – the works of mercy in those directions: of healing, forgiveness, peace, patience, generosity, inclusion – but not mere inclusion – but an intentional welcome of the marginalized into the centre of community again.

Of course, these are not our works of mercy – but acts that proceed from the character of God's mercy. And so it is when we pray in this way, according to God's nature, according to the way that Jesus would have us follow, that God will grant us the strength to accomplish these things in his name.

It's good to be really clear about this – as Jesus says, “From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I'll do.”

And you know, I see this character in the many ministries around our Diocese – so many ministries that perhaps surprisingly, we've been able to continue when so much has ceased in these last months. Ministries that cumulatively are more than the sum of their parts.

It may be difficult sometimes for us to believe Jesus' statement that “the one who believes in me will also do the works I do, and in fact will do greater works than these, . . .” but when the law of God's love is at the centre of our works, they have an impact that is literally world-changing.

And that is when I think we see the very heart of God for us.

In the name of God: the three in one: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.