

Sermon Easter 6 Year B 2021

The gospel portion placed before us today is not a long one. It certainly is one of the difficulties and frustrations of the way we have the scriptures mostly presented to us in the Eucharist: smallish bite size pieces, easier to digest but cut off from the larger contexts which often help give our texts meaning. We should never make the mistake in thinking that the bible readings we hear at Mass is all there is to hear and know and understand about the Bible! The old lectionaries, including that of the BCP, but in line with all the ancient churches both East and West saw the faithful served a very thin diet of readings over the course of just one year. A gospel portion and an epistle for the 52 weeks of the year with some variety for the saints' days and feast days. But even over the much-expanded three-year cycle introduced in the 1960s, which added an Old Testament reading there is a very great deal we still don't hear.

We are mistaken if we think that the idea of the mass readings is to 'get through the bible'. It isn't. The idea is to expose us to the great themes and ideas and stories. The mass cannot do everything. We often load so many expectations on to the hour or so we have in church once a week: that we will be spiritually fed, that we will be well instructed; that it will be the place where all our teaching on the faith occurs; the only time we set aside time for intentional Christian fellowship; which will do all our evangelistic projects; and when we get our main diet of the bible. All layered upon what we do now!! I hope you can see how unreasonable those expectations are! But it is surely the duty of every believer who is able, to read and know the scriptures. But for this *you* are responsible, in your own homes, in your own devotions. Don't expect that coming to Sunday mass will result in a fully formed Christian. Don't expect that what we do here Sunday by Sunday is sufficient for knowing the bible well.

What we hear Sunday by Sunday is now a much richer course. But in many ways, it is still the 'highlights tour'. The gospel portion put to us today even if short, is certainly one of the great highlights. It is part of an incredibly dense and rich section John's Gospel. Here we are in chapter 15 of the fourth gospel. The context is the last supper. Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet. And the narrative gives way - some three whole chapters - to a lengthy monologue Jesus addresses to the disciples. This section we might call the 'last will and testament' of Jesus. As the story moves to Jesus' passion and death we hear Our Lord imparting, in distilled form, truths and insights, words of encouragement, warnings, and to remind the disciples of their mission and identity.

So, what we have in this lengthy part of John's Gospel is a veritable treasure trove of riches. But today we look into this treasure trove and we take out a handful from this incredible wealth. Again, this is not a long gospel portion but look what we have there! So many important ideas about our faith and Christian life are brought together. *As the Father has loved me so I love you. Keep my commandment. Abide in my love. Love one another. That my joy may be in you. I call you friends.* Love. Joy. Commandment. Friends. All sparkling like diamonds. None of these we could be without! So, with this sparkling handful, we don't want to look elsewhere, we don't need in *this* instance a great swathe of surrounding texts. We want to come in close and notice the details. And from among these brilliant jewels put to us today, just one we might draw back from, take notice of and delight in.

Even though it shines so brilliantly, and is of such great importance, we might easily miss it, because of everything else shining about it! An idea almost put to us in passing. Occasionally in the Scriptures a single verse or single idea is presented to us that is so radical in its implications, so fundamentally does it change our thinking about God, our relationship with, our thinking about ourselves. And we have such a one today: *I no longer call you servants, but friends.... You are my friends, if you do what I command you.* In all our faith could anything be more beautiful than this?

This image of friendship with Christ is surely one of the most profound spiritual insights, and indeed spiritual gifts, our faith offers. And this especially when we consider what else the faith claims for our Lord Christ, especially from this gospel. That in Christ we find the Word made flesh, equal with the Father, the very agent of Creation, the Lord of all. Yet with him, we may enjoy friendship! And this idea really a continuation of another key idea from this gospel which we also see shimmering in today's gem-like handful: the idea *of abiding*. Jesus who calls us, invites us to *abide* with him even as he abides with us and abides with the Father. To abide in Jesus is to make our home with him and to let Jesus make his home with us; for us to feel at home with him and in him. It is a place of rest for one another. It is a place of mutual indwelling and - in a completely new way of understanding and relating to God - of friendship with God. God in Jesus draws close to us that we might draw close to God. Jesus, because he abides with the Father - is one with the Father - and because Jesus seeks to abide with *us*, means that through friendship with Jesus we too can have friendship with the Father. Jesus draws close to us, that we might be the friend of God.

And this, brilliant gem-like truth demonstrates the change of status we have with Christ. He no longer calls us servants but rather friends. In the Jewish mind, those who enjoyed covenant relationship with God were *servants* of God. But for Jesus., “*No longer do I call you servants for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you.*” Which simply goes to highlight quality of our status in this relationship. Yes, we are mere creatures, yes, we are miserable sinners, yes, we are unworthy. But Christ abiding with us, our friendship with Christ, reminds us of *the dignity* we have. So often we are nervous, unsure, hesitant about getting too close. We close off our hearts, allow them to become cold or indifferent to Christ’s invitation, or we depend on a sort of formalism. But the gospel today should assure us. It shows us, that we can hope for something much, much more.

The wealth of sacred scripture is such that perhaps we cannot delve into all its richness within a lifetime. Indeed, after 2000 years, it has proved it can sustain and build the faith of every generation of believers without exhausting itself. But within this wealth God has gifted us with one treasure we would all do well to hold on to and turn back to again and again: that friendship with God is possible. And we ought hold on to this and turn to this because human life is a struggle. We all know this for ourselves! We can become overwhelmed and paralysed when confronted with the difficulties of our existence and smallness of our lives. We can rest in our friendship with Christ when we wrestle with the questions, *who are we, what are we, do our lives matter, do our lives have significance, meaning, purpose?* Because Christ shows us the dignity and worth we do have. He shows us that we do matter and that in him we can find meaning and purpose. And we can have *confidence* in our relationship with God.

The consistent hope of Christians is that in Jesus we find One who shows us God’s concern for us, God’s love for us, that we do matter, that we are not left alone to struggle and wander alone in the dark, that a beautiful, joyous life is offered to us both for this life and for eternity. God does not remain distant, aloof, isolated from our sufferings or our human joys. God is not content to remain strange or fearful or terrible or unknown. Indeed, God comes to us in Jesus as friend. And in his friendship he invites us to rest in his loving embrace. He who is both Creator and Lord, who is transcendent and glorious, eternal and majestic desires to end our loneliness and accept his friendship. May we all, then, delighting in this truth, accept his gift. Amen.