

Sermon Easter 7 Year B 2021

On this last Sunday of Easter before Pentecost we are directed to chapter 17 of John's Gospel and Jesus' prayer for anxious disciples. At first it might not seem all that important to listen to Jesus pray for the twelve. By the time this gospel was written they were probably all dead. Why not concentrate on prayer for the early church or for our church? The fact is, Jesus' prayer for his disciples is on behalf of the church through succeeding generations, because it is vital to the life of the church to know that the revelation, the truth from Jesus has been faithfully transmitted. The reason why we can eavesdrop on this prayer is to assure us that exactly what the apostles received, we receive. It answers the question, *can we trust the tradition we have received?* The Gospel today says that, yes, we can trust it. It lays out the credentials of both the message and the messengers. It proposes the way in which the generations that follow Christ and his apostles may trust the message that was entrusted to them.

The gospel today asserts that the truth, *the revelation from Jesus has been faithfully transmitted.* We can trust it. Earlier in this chapter we are told the apostles were given by God himself to Jesus. Jesus give to them the word of God; they received that word, believed it and kept it; they had not been corrupted by the world because they were not of the world. We hear today that Jesus was sanctified in total dedication to God, and so too were the disciples set apart (consecrated) for the truth. The apostles had as *their sole purpose the continuation of the mission* which Jesus had from God. To the question, *is this trustworthy, is this deserving of my hope and devotion* the evangelist here leaves no doubt: the church is not orphan in the world. The church is not the creation of a religious delusion or spiritual fantasy. It does not come from rumor or superstition. For those who need to examine the credentials of the church's life and message, here is truth's pedigree, this is where the truth of the church, the truth that has sustained the faith of countless believers, this is where our faith comes from: from God, to Christ, to the apostles, to the church. Yes, it is trustworthy.

Many religions of the ancient world promised salvation. But only Christianity dared to present salvation in a way that was recent and historically verifiable. As an example, at the end of the first century the Roman Emperor Domitian, anxious about potential rivals, and having heard about some strange new 'kingdom', summoned the remaining relatives of Jesus who called him the king of kings. They were easily rounded up and interrogated. But Domitian found them laughably working class, with calluses on their

hands and without much money or land, so he let them go. The point being Christianity could be called up and examined. Its origins could be visited and investigated.

The Christian faith is anchored in real people and real places. The important thing about Christian faith, though, is that we believe there has been a continuous, unbroken link to the faith of that first generation. The faith that those poor family members of our Lord knew when hauled in front of the emperor is one and the same faith in all its essentials to what we hold. It is reliable and trustworthy. We know it to have stood unchanged because of what we call the apostolic ministry, the particular ministry outlined in the gospel today.

‘Apostle’, simply meaning ‘one who is sent’ carries the idea of a kind agent, emissary, an ambassador even. But more than just a messenger or representative. They stand in *the place of*, they speak for and act on behalf of the one they represent. Just a couple verses after our gospel reading today, Jesus says to the apostles, *as the Father has sent me, so I send you*. Now, the office of apostle was not something any of the twelve had earned. They had in fact proven themselves singularly *unworthy* of the office and unprepared for the task. After years of instructions could still move their Lord and teacher to exasperation: *have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me?*

Yet our Lord Christ saw past their limitations – just as he sees past ours! And Jesus did not give up on what he had called them to. Despite their limitations, their failures and uncertainties, *they would be* Christ’s representatives, they would be his agent, his emissaries and ambassadors. Each would be as Jesus himself. Each would be empowered to do the things that Jesus himself had. Which is one of the important points of the Book of Acts: the apostles *continued Jesus’ work*, of healing the sick, casting out demons, proclaiming the good news, even raising the dead and forgiving sins. The apostles charged – set apart (sanctified) - to act as Jesus’ ongoing presence in the world. Jesus’ apostles acting as Jesus himself.

Even as they know their unworthiness, they also know the dignity of their office. Paul himself refers to Peter, James and John as ‘pillars’ of the church. Elsewhere they are described as the foundation stones. Pillars and foundation stones both designed hold the church together and hold it up. In our creed, we confess the church *as one, holy, catholic and apostolic*. The best-selling books from the early centuries all bore titles that claimed a connection to the apostles: the apostolic tradition; the apostolic

constitutions; the apostolic teaching; proof of the apostolic preaching. All conveying a sense that no preaching, tradition or doctrine was legitimate unless it could be traced to the generation of the apostles. Because what they said came from Christ.

As the Father sends Jesus so Jesus sends the apostles. And they established the life of the church as a tradition, something handed on. St Paul tells us as much in First Corinthians: the faith of the church was something that had to be handed on. Fidelity to this tradition was a frequent concern of Paul; *brethren stand firm and hold to the tradition which you were taught by us. Now we command you ... in the name of the Lord Jesus that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. And I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.* Paul considered himself 'steward of the mysteries of God.' Which is perhaps the most beautiful expression about how we might approach our faith.

The apostles were more than administrators of the church, more than mere functionaries and overseers. They were charged with being Christ's presence in the world. This goes some way to explain why the church catholic must *continue* to stridently dismiss deviations, innovations and contradictions to that message as inauthentic, as undermining the integrity of the gospel and the very life of the church. They must be dismissed because they are contradictions and deviations to the message of the Lord Christ himself.

We live in an age when the question of what is trustworthy has never been more hotly contested. Ours is an age when all the old authorities have fallen, they stand empty of their power. It means it is not enough for us to say the bible says, or the church, or church documents, or church councils say this or that. They mean nothing to a world which has settled on a truth of one, a truth which goes no further than the individual and their perceived truth or intuition. It means that even as the gospel today outlines its trustworthiness credentials, this actually rings hollow to those about us. But what is heard, what is respected, is when a message – a truth – is seen to shine with such clarity and integrity in individuals. This means that the faith of the apostles must be a compelling force *in us*. In other words, our very lives are meant to show it is true, that it can bring us freedom and life, and that our truth makes best sense in this truth. That is what people will take notice of, what others will listen to. We can commend the truth of the gospel to others when we can show that it is true for us. Amen.