

Fifth Sunday of Easter



Christ's Farewell Discourse, detail, from the Maesta by Duccio (c1255–c1318)

Gospel *John 14.1-14*

in the course of the Last Supper, after the foot washing and Judas's departure

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 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 you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.' Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and do you still not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 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, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Homily

Part of our experience of the world at a time of pandemic has been the distress of separation. Not necessarily separation from everyone, depending on where you live, or how you work; and not necessarily separation in terms of basic communication either. One way or another we can write to each other, call one another, and see one another, even Zoom together! Nonetheless there's a *high degree* of separation: we can't decide or plan to meet, or work, or travel together. It's not only the result of isolation: to be separated is to stay safe and keep others safe.

But it has also reduced our society and others down to a degree of paralysis, indecision and unproductiveness that we all want to end. Most painfully of course, it continues to be separation between those who must work on the front line, and those who must stay at home; those who have the wealth to provide for themselves, and those whose poverty deepens; those who are inaccessible in hospital or care homes, and those they most love; those who are dying and dead, and those they have left behind.

Separation is also at the root of the passage the Church gives us from the Gospel this morning: Jesus talking to his disciples about the prospect of them being separated from one another by his passion and death. And with the kind of perfect timing that has come time and time again from the hand of God during this crisis, it is a word of consolation for those of the second world war generation who have felt their separation from loved ones whom they have mourned and remembered for three-quarters of a century.

Faced with the prospect of separation by the events which were soon to unfold, there is pain on all sides for Jesus and his disciples. His imminent departure was a crisis for their little community. It would play out for the disciples not only in emotional turmoil, but also in fear and indecision. By trying to speak words of encouragement Jesus is making his departure, and the emptiness that it will leave in his disciples hearts, an opportunity for their rebirth. He encourages them to have faith, to place their trust in him, and not to be disturbed (*Jn* 14.1). If, thanks to the power of trust, those words come alive in the hearts of the disciples, then they will be able move away from loss to creativity, from turmoil to courage, from death to life. And he explained that he would not be separated from them. The departure that ‘he was to accomplish in Jerusalem’ (literally called his *exodus* in *Lk* 9.31), was not simply a going away, a goodbye, never to be seen again. He was going ahead of *them* so as to ensure that the Father’s place—his kingdom, his table, his mansion (*Jn* 14.2—3)—was *prepared* as a place where they also would be, and would be welcomed.

These are words that reach us too through the gospel. Jesus is asking the disciples (and us) to invest their trust and dependence in him. By asking them (and us) to enter that special darkness that we call faith, that special submission to what God offers us but which we don’t already understand, Jesus urges his disciples to transform the terror of feeling abandoned into courage by giving themselves to the Lord. He is not *in fact* abandoning them; they are *not* being separated from him in any obvious sense. Jesus is preparing the future, and beginning a new and different—and *deeper*—phase of relations with them.

And so the discussion among the disciples inevitably starts: begun by Thomas the questioner and continued by the Philip the pragmatist, each picking up threads left off in the previous chapters of this gospel. Thomas who had pressed his fellow disciples in chapter 11, ‘Let us go with him, that we may also die with him’ (v.16) now wants to know from Jesus the path that has to be followed to where he is going. And Philip, whom some Greeks had approached to see *Jesus* in chapter 12 (vv.21-23), now lays out before the Lord his *own* longing: he wants to ‘see’ the *Father* (14.8), to see his face. Jesus’s replies are not only to Thomas and Philip: they usher us also right into the very heart of Christian faith. To Thomas, ‘Yes, you can follow: I am the way. Obey and imitate me.’ (v.6). To Philip, ‘Yes, you can see the Father. Anyone who has seen *me* has seen him’ (*Jn* 14.9; see also *Jn* 12.45: ‘He who sees me, sees him who sent me.’) These few words sum what is so new about the New Testament: God, who according to the Old Testament is so profoundly separate, so holy, whom no person could both see and live, *has* shown his face. He *has made himself* visible—and much *more* than simply visible—in Jesus Christ. ‘The New Testament puts an end to the Father’s invisibility’, says Pope Benedict XVI (*Regina caeli*, 22 May 2011). To see Jesus is to see the Father revealed. Jesus and his Father are one. By his own explanation, Jesus does and says only what he sees the Father doing and saying. They are inseparable. And it is this inseparability that makes the Father, for whom all human beings long, visible, and knowable and trustable.

But Jesus is not simply inseparable from God. He is inseparable from us also. Christ is not simply the one *in whom* we believe because he fully reveals to us what God is like; he is also the one *with whom* we believe because he fully reveals to us humanity’s high calling (cf *Gaudium et spes*, 22a). Far from divorcing Christians from reality, our faith in the Son of God who became man in Jesus of Nazareth enables us to see how much God loves this world and is constantly guiding it towards himself. This leads us Christians to live our daily lives in this world with ever greater commitment and intensity, praying for courage, sacrifice and charity. We are not looking for an already tired ‘new normal’ when human beings emerge bruised and suffering from this pandemic. We look to Christ, and to the spacious vision of the unity of God’s new creation, which the early Christians understood; and to the renewed society that could and must and should be built. For we are convinced that ‘neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (*Rom* 8.38–9).

Prayer

Almighty Father, your Son Jesus Christ, wonderfully revealed to us the mystery of your love and mercy; and even more wonderfully revealed the light and truth of our own high calling as human beings: help us to know you and to love you in your Son; to do what he commands, to ingest his word, and to imbibe his wisdom, so that we, like him, may reflect in acts of courage, and sacrifice and charity your glory in this world; though the same Christ our Lord. Amen.