

Sunday Online Sermon – 17/05/2020

Last week I spoke of how that we are precious in God's sight, and of how we need to cast off all the muck that surrounds us, for we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. But how are we to do this?

How are we to show love to one another, how are we to follow our Lord when we are struggling to simply hold things together? Today's Gospel reading from John provides us with Jesus' answer to this question.

The Gospel of John was written around the close of the first century AD. It was written in the midst of a community for whom the flesh and blood of Jesus was only a memory. Most of those in John's community had never met Jesus. Most, if not all, the disciples were dead. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, a sign for many that the end-time would soon come.

But the end-time didn't come.

Life went on, and in many ways, that was the hardest part of all. Jesus hadn't returned even when all the signs seemed right. They couldn't even worship in the synagogues anymore. This community of believers felt pushed to the very edge of despair, and despair could defeat them.

The gospel writer knew the dangers of such despair. So John pulled together many of the things Jesus said into one section of the Gospel, just before he writes about the arrest of Jesus, what is often called, "The Farewell Discourses." These chapters are called the farewell discourse for good reason: for in them Jesus tells them that he is going away, but is coming back soon. He prepares them for his crucifixion and for the life of faith that they will have in the coming years.

It was as if John was saying to the believers in the late first century, look and learn from what Jesus told the disciples, for they faced a situation just like yours. It was as if he was saying to them: 'Look, you aren't the first ones to travel this road, for the first disciples experienced the same thing'.

They too had hopes that the oppression and corruption of their times would soon end. They too had to deal with bitter disappointment. They too had to face the challenges of their daily life without the physical presence of their Lord.

The entire 'farewell discourse', is five chapters long, from chapter 13 to the end of chapter 17. These five chapters contain many profound statements and if you ever feel abandoned, in trouble, or in need of comfort, I would recommend you read them through. It is amazing how the power of the words build as you work your way through them.

They are Jesus' message to his beloved disciples, to prepare them for his eventual crucifixion, they are John's message to the disciples at the end of the first century, and they are also for us – to help us live the life of faith in this world.

So what did Jesus tell his early disciples?

Firstly, he said

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Love is the dominant theme of these chapters.

*" A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.
" Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.
" I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

But how were they to love Jesus and obey Jesus' commands without him? They struggled to do that when he was with them, how could they possibly manage that when he was gone?

The answer to that question is given in today's reading from chapter 14.

*'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.
¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

Of course, Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit here. The Holy Spirit is for us what the earthly Jesus was for his disciples: a paraclete from God, a helper, a counselor, an advocate, a comforter—one who comes to our aid and defense in time of trouble.

As Jesus says,

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

This last verse is a fascinating one,

²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

It seems to be the opposite of what we often hear as the Gospel message. It is saying that if we obey the commandments and love Jesus, he will love us and send us a helper. We often hear that it is the other way around. Jesus loves us and reveals himself to us and then we learn to love him and obey what he says. What does this all mean?

I think we have to remember that Jesus' words were being spoken to his disciples. He wasn't presenting a theology that explains how someone becomes a Christian. It is a mistake to read the words of Jesus in the same way we might read the Apostle Paul. I think Jesus was giving very practical advice about how to live as his follower. He is telling us to persevere and follow his commands, and he will send us the Holy Spirit to help us. Because I think it is primarily practical advice, I think it is best explained by using an example.

Corrie ten Boom was a young Dutch girl when World War II began. Her devout Christian family participated in the Resistance, hiding Jews from the Nazis. Eventually, Corrie and her family were betrayed, arrested, and interned in order to kill them off. They were sent to Ravensbrook Concentration Camp where Corrie's younger sister soon died.

After the war, Corrie wrote about that trial and her faith, and soon after that she was asked to speak at many churches. So, she toured post-war Europe speaking about the Gospel generally, but particularly about Christian forgiveness. All was going well until one day. The year was 1947. Corrie was in church in Munich, Germany. She was in the middle of her talk when suddenly her blood ran cold.

She knew it was him. She could never forget that face. There in the church he sat: A Ravensbrook guard, one her cruelest captors. The man who had stood post at the processing center's shower station where he and other male guards had taunted the terrified, naked women. Shaken, Corrie continued and concluded her talk.

After her lecture as she greeted people, her former tormentor approached Corrie. He warmly thanked her for her remarks, saying with a smile, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein. To think that, as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away!"

Describing this moment in her book 'Tramp for the Lord', Corrie wrote:

"His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people about the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more?

'Lord Jesus,' I prayed, 'forgive me and help me to forgive him.'
I tried to smile; I struggled to raise my hand. I could not.
I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity.
And so again I breathed a silent prayer. 'Jesus,' I prayed,
'I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.'

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened.
From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand
a current seemed to pass from me to him,
while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

As Jesus said,

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments... They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, **and I will love them and reveal myself to them.**" Amen.*