**Homily – 5th Sunday of Easter (A)**

*Acts 6: 1-7;  1 Pet. 2: 4-9  &  Jn. 14: 1-12*

Despite its familiarity, I think there are one or two things which make our hearing of that gospel passage this morning just a little odd. In the first place, we have heard it before – in fact the first half was the gospel at Mass on Friday, the second at Mass yesterday, and that is very unusual. The compilers of the lectionary are normally pretty good at offering alternative passages when a Sunday gospel is repeated on a weekday – but they do not do so in this case. I will return to that in a few moments.

In the second place, the way we “hear” this passage is also a little strange. I don’t know about you, but hearing that passage in Eastertide makes it sound as though this is a conversation between Jesus and the apostles held *after* his resurrection. Jesus says he is going away to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house, and then return to take us with him. For us, perhaps, hearing this now in these Easter days, the implication seems to be that the narrative is preparing the disciples for the Jesus’ Ascension. Indeed, I am pretty sure that this is precisely the reason why it comes where it does in the weekday lectionary, and equally why there is no “substitute passage” as I have just mentioned. Starting two weeks before the traditional date of Ascension on the Thursday of the 6th week of Easter, it is the first of a whole series of gospels, all drawn from the so-called “Farewell Discourse” in John, chapters 14-17 – that long passage of Jesus’ intimate teaching of the apostles, all of which precedes his “departure” from them.

But of course, despite the aptness of such a crafting of the lectionary, that is not the true context of this passage within John’s gospel as I’m sure you are aware. Rather, Jesus speaks these words not before the Ascension but at the Last Supper. He has just washed the disciples’ feet, much to their consternation. He has just shared the Passover meal with them, during which Judas has left to betray him. Indeed, the very words that precede the passage we heard read this morning are Jesus’ prophecy of Peter’s three-fold denial before cockcrow. That is the real context of these words, and indeed of the whole “Farewell Discourse” I mentioned a few moments ago, and I think that is important for us to remember.

I have always been very struck by this. Jesus gives some of his tenderest teaching at precisely this point in his life. Indeed, his famous teaching on love in Jn.15, so often chosen for use at weddings, is drawn not from some relaxed moment of intimacy with the Twelve, not from one of those times of withdrawal they had often shared, but from this highly dramatic and tense few hours in the Upper Room. Jesus knows very well what is about to happen; as I have noted already, Judas has already left and Peter’s denials just been predicted. And yet there is nothing of self-absorption here, nothing of bitterness, nothing of fear – as would probably have been the case if this were us. Rather, Jesus’ first thoughts are for his friends, for the Twelve. Even the words he chooses seem so homely. To Thomas, he speaks of “preparing a place for you in my Father’s house”, to Philip of “going to my Father”.

The former sounds as if he is making up the bed in the guestroom, making sure there are fresh towels, the latter like a simple journey to a well-known destination – and yet in both cases, he is speaking of his path through suffering, through the Cross, through Death and the tomb and then into Easter morning. It is only in this way that he can prepare a place for us, can open his Father’s house for us, can enable us to do works even greater than his own.

For me, the heart of this gospel is desire. Amazingly, to my mind almost incredibly, what spurs Jesus on through the coming horror is desire – a deep and unwavering desire, voiced several times in John’s gospel – that his friends should share everything with him. It is the very first thing he speaks of in this long discourse of love: “so that where I am, you may be too”. His first thought is that desire to do good for his friends, for us – for, as he will go on to say, we too are his friends if we do what he commands, and love one another as he has loved us. It reminds me of those many beautiful passages in Julian of Norwich where she speaks of her Crucified Saviour in such tender words: *‘for though the dear humanity of Christ could only suffer once, his goodness would always make him willing to do so, every day if need be... but for love of me to be willing to die times without number is, to my mind, the greatest gesture the Lord God could make to the soul of man’* (Rev §22). Jesus’ desire for us is very great, deeper than we can fathom.

Yet Jesus’ desire is not the only one in this gospel. It is desire too – perhaps naïve, perhaps misguided – which leads Philip to say: “Lord, let us see the Father and then we shall be satisfied.” Certainly, Philip has misunderstood, has failed to recognise that identity between Jesus and the Father – an identity of will, of power and of love in a perfect harmony of persons – and yet it is a genuine desire, a desire which springs from a thirsty soul, a soul as yet unsatisfied. And Jesus does not rebuke that desire, that naivety, but gently leads it on to a deeper understanding, an understanding which will be made perfect on the evening of Easter day.

And perhaps there is something there for each of us, too. I suspect that – at our core – we too are still thirsty disciples, still naïve disciples, still dissatisfied disciples. Perhaps we too would like to ask Philip’s question, would like to have that full revelation of God before our physical eyes. And yet, as with Philip, that vision is not granted to us yet, but only hints and glimmers. And why? Well perhaps because our gentle Lord knows that to quench that desire now would be to “switch off” our discipleship, would remove the “motor” of our pilgrim path through Christ to the Father whose face we long for. And perhaps that is at least part of the point of Eastertide each year. As we hear again, as we live again these great mysteries of our salvation, we are reminded of who we really are: *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who has called (us) out of darkness and into his wonderful light* (1 Pet. 2:9) – and remembering, find our desire rekindled and deepened. It is a desire beautifully captured in a few simple, if seemingly paradoxical, words of St Anselm in his Proslogion (lines 139-143):

*Let me seek you by desiring you, and desire you by seeking you;*

*Let me find you by loving you, and love you in finding you.*

Let it be so for each one of us. Amen.

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