

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 14.1-14

Today's gospel takes us back to the evening of Maundy Thursday. The evening during which Jesus gives a New Commandment. He does not receive a commandment like Moses, rather he gives a commandment. "... love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35) This is more than loving your neighbour as yourself. We are apprentices in the school of divine love. Christian love is inspired by Jesus' example of both seeking and doing the Father's will, but also in the existing inter-relationships between them that he describes in today's gospel. During what is known as the Farewell Discourse Jesus explains in a circular and repeating manner that he and the Father are one. And still we do not really understand, as we see through a glass, darkly. God, the Father and Jesus indwell one another. They abide in one another. Their relationship is characterised by divine love.

Jesus has washed the disciples' feet. He has predicted that Peter will deny him three times. Judas has been identified by Jesus as the one who will betray him. And Judas has left the table to do just that. Jesus has also spoken of his glorification meaning his impending death indicating what is yet to be revealed in St Paul's words "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). It is against the backdrop of this crisis, in which there is much to be troubled about, that Jesus speaks to the eleven disciples in the Upper Room, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Into the context of broken relationships think of Peter and Judas, but also of Thomas and Philip who still do not understand, but who are still there with Jesus in the Upper Room, Jesus speaks words of assurance, words of comfort. Words that he can speak because the Father and the Son abide in one another. They indwell one another. According to Jesus' self-understanding, believing in God and believing in him are connected, because God and he are intimately related to one another. In the face of the crisis that both Jesus and the disciples find themselves in, Jesus does not focus on his troubles, but instead he turns to the disciples. He speaks to them. In the face of disaster he counsels faith, faith in God and faith in him witnessing to himself. "Believe in God, believe also in me." This is where you must put your trust. This will see you through.

For Christians this has been a testing time and the responses have been varied. For some it has tested their faith as captured by one of the petitions at the centre of our prayer life as a community this week as we pray for those who are doubting their faith, while at the same time asking for trust and assurance. During this testing time there have also been a few loud voices asserting without nuance the sovereignty of God, people who seem to believe that by turning up the volume and asserting their unswerving faith that they are faithful witnesses. Really? I wonder. In a first attempt at this sermon I spent a long time saying it is not an either/or, but a both/and, drawing on examples from political discourse which I shall not be treating you to. But I don't want to fail to mention that on Tuesday representatives of the lower and upper houses of the Austrian government met to mark the liberation of the concentration camp Mauthausen, that on Friday nation-states

marked the end of WW II and the liberation from Nazi ideology and state oppression, and finally that Austria marked twenty-five years of membership in the European Union. These occasions remind us what we are capable of as human beings for good or for bad, to divide or to build up and to work against each other or for one another.

The present crisis has challenged our faith, questioned our picture of God, while reminding us of the fragility of our life, of all our lives. We have lost trust in our immediate environment, this time not because of global warming but because of a virus that we cannot see. Our confidence in shared and public spaces is undermined. To love your neighbour and for us to love another as he loves us we must respect social distancing with a measure of common sense. The Viennese are proud of their public transport system, and now are inclined to shun it. The gap between rich, well to do, those struggling to make ends meet and the poor has become self-evident yet again. This crisis has reminded us of the interconnectedness of all life. The virus has been held in check by our withdrawing from one another, hopefully only for a while, whereas the Christian faith calls us to go towards one another and to embrace one another, to wash one another's feet, while continuing to answer the call to go forward, to lead as Jesus does, to be light, leaven and salt.

Looking again at the Gospel set for today it is good to be reminded that believing in God and in Jesus is to be the foundation of our lives giving purpose and direction to them as captured succinctly in Jesus' "I am the way, the truth and the life." It is good to be invited anew to put our trust in God and in Jesus encountering Jesus amidst the brokenness of the world and to believe again, to reaffirm our faith, against the backdrop of what we are presently experiencing. It is good to be reminded that even now we can be doing the works of God, remaining faithful, as we pray in Jesus' name.

Believing, praying, and doing are characteristics of the Christian faith that Jesus touches on in today's Gospel, and as long as we inhabit this earth we are to be making them our own as we grow into God, as we come to dwell and abide in the Father's house, not only secure in our future in God, but also secure in our present in God. It is hard from me to imagine that I can be doing greater works than Jesus. It is hard for me to imagine that whatever I ask in Jesus' name he will do. Those two are more difficult for me personally than trusting in Jesus' saving work of new life and believing in him. Despite being of little faith and for having been with him all this time... Nevertheless I continue to pray, sometimes more readily than at other times, seeking together with you, brothers and sisters, to be doing the works of God, knowing my own frailty all too well. In my frailty and in my vulnerability I acknowledge that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and can be and is the way and the truth and the life not only for me, but for all those who call on his name.

But the focus on self is not how we should hear this gospel reading in the first instance. Remember Jesus is speaking to the eleven disciples, who are with him in the Upper Room. Look at this motley bunch – and at Jesus' vision of what they will become. He speaks to them of doing greater works and answering their prayers if they are prayed in his name. He is speaking to them as a group. Within the group each has

different abilities and strengths, but also weaknesses and questions, like Thomas and Philip, but it is as disciples, as a group, that they are being addressed and it is by seeing this clearly that we can better make sense of the promise-oriented imagery in the face of adversity that marks this gospel reading. This passage is not addressed to me as an individual, but to all of us for whom Jesus is preparing an abiding place. We have been making our way through this crisis from Sunday to Sunday by keeping a Eucharistic fast. No virtual Eucharists here. We have met via the platform Zoom to be turned to one another as those who we believe in God and in Him that we might be turned back into our everyday lives and to the world in its fallenness, complexity and beauty.

The classical tenet that the Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts holds true for the Church. We as the body of Christ, come to inhabit not by our merit but by the work of God wrought in and through Jesus the Father's house, which is simultaneously our future and our Now, being strengthened, informed and directed by the Holy Spirit. There is but one Church. And there is but one people. Together as we give ourselves to prayer, work and service believing in God and in his Son Jesus Christ we can begin to appreciate what Jesus meant. We shall rise to his vision of greater works. Prayers shall be answered. The focus is not on me or you, but on the Us of the Church. Jesus' works witness to the Father. Our works in like manner are to witness to the reality and love of God for the world.

Let there be no mistake – this is a lot to live up to, in these times or at any time. Are we able? Only, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it – only as we look to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. (hebrews 12.2) He is in us, and all fullness is in him. Amen.