Jesus’ Farewell Discourse

Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21

Over time there have been many memorable and famous last words. John Quincy Adams said “This is the last of earth. I am content”. Churchill said, “I’m bored with it all.” Noel Coward said” Goodnight my darlings” Jesus said “It is finished.”

Last words are the opportunity to make a last request, or final comment on life, say goodbye, when there isn’t time for anything longer. In today’s appointed gospel reading, we are hearing what is known as Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse,” the words he spoke to his disciples at the Passover dinner the night before he died. It might seem strange that the lectionary sets this reading during this resurrection season of Eastertide, but in fact this account summarizes the reality of the resurrection, witnessed by Jesus’ followers, and recorded by John:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This 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.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.”

By this point, the night before his arrest, Jesus wants the disciples to know this is it - I will be leaving, They hadn’t wanted to believe his warnings earlier, though Jesus has told them several times. He had things to say to them that they needed to face up to, and this was the last opportunity. The message was: soon I will be gone, and I want you to know how to live in my absence. John’s gospel was written some 80 years after Jesus lived and died. His teachings, and accounts of His life and ministry, his promise of salvation and the kingdom of God, inspired the early Christian communities, as they inspire us in 2020. In an age when more people declare themselves to be spiritual rather than religious, how do we live out Christian values, and remain convinced of their relevance, any more than the disciples could 2000 years ago, when Jesus told them he was leaving them? There was an urgency about this valediction, and they needed to listen and prepare for what was expected of them next.

Jesus’ last words to them that night were reminders of how to live after he’s gone, but also a reassurance that he won’t leave them like orphans.

They were overcome with anxiety and dread of danger, violence, danger, the talk of death. They will be alone without their friend, their teacher, their master. But then came Jesus assurance: I won’t leave you without support, without help, without love. In other words he promises they are not abandoned.

Fear of abandonment is a condition many have to work through in counseling or therapy sessions. It’s very likely chipping away at the wellbeing of many at the moment, as we are isolated in ways not of our choosing, and denied opportunities to socialize with family, friends and in everyday encounters which make us feel validated and content. Many are experiencing
anxiety and depression in these weeks, from having their usual human interactions taken away indefinitely, and must wait until the authorities allow that deprivation to be eased or ended. It’s hard for many struggling with this isolation to cope with the negative feelings it has caused. The challenge is to combat those fears and find ways to feel validated and overcome them. It’s especially difficult for families where a loved one has died, and present restrictions prevent proper funerals to enable grieving to take place. Imagine the sadness of care home residents abandoned without visits allowed, and terminally ill patients dying alone, without family comforting them or being fortified by the rites of the church.

Sadly there are many ways to feel abandoned. When we are far away from family and others we love and miss. When we long to work or be productive, and the opportunities aren’t there. When no one ever comes to visit you. When you’re incarcerated and forgotten. When you’re alone at Thanksgiving or on Christmas Day. When your family turn their backs on you because of some habit you can’t kick. When your demons oppress you and you can’t escape them. When you live in a doorway or on the street, ignored by passers by.

Many of us will have experienced a sense of being left on our own during this crisis, and at some other times in our lives. In whatever ways that has or does manifest itself, we, like the disciples that last night, can be assured by Jesus’ words I will not leave you abandoned, like orphans.

He said, I will ask the Father to send another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, so that I can always be with you. This is John’s description of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter to those who Jesus has gone away from. It’s someone on your side, who moves and works for you, to support, help, and guide.

*When we feel abandoned and alone, the Holy Spirit is with us.*
*When we can’t find words to describe pain, the Holy Spirit is with us.*
*When there’s no one to offload our worries onto, the Holy Spirit is with us.*
*When we live in the middle of anxious times, the Holy Spirit is with us.*
*When we are downhearted fearing for the future of our world, God’s Holy Spirit is with us.*

As we continue through Eastertide, let us be assured by its meaning, and by Jesus’ promise that we are not alone, abandoned like orphans. Like the disciples we have been told by Jesus how we are to live: trusting God and loving our neighbors - whoever they are. In his online meeting with all clergy this week, our bishop reminded us that church is open, even if church buildings are closed. Church must be present in the community in all its needs.

A need that had been presenting itself for months at St Mark’s was to provide food for families in need. Some didn’t readily recognize a need, but the Holy Spirit encouraged the vision to set up a food distribution point at our church, and the ministry that is currently benefiting 100 people per week. This ministry has created an opportunity for all of us to reach out to meet a real need as church serving the world. In what other ways might we create, identify, support and implement new ways to being church in our time?
Back to John’s gospel and its translation. As the church comes to celebrate the Ascension of Jesus, and then Pentecost, we understand Jesus speaking of sending an advocate to mean helper or comforter. We tend to think of comfort as a means to bring relief to sadness or sorrow, but the Latin translation means “being strong or brave together.” The Comforter is going to come and help someone who helps the dispirited be brave. Jesus will send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who will be with us, and so we can be brave together. And Jesus promises, we will recognize him when we see him. But we must listen, and be ready to receive him.

AMEN

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