

The Fifth Sunday of Easter 2019

Steven Hilton, Ordinand

John 13:31-35

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The Fourth of May 1986 was a Sunday. It was, like today, the Fifth Sunday of Easter. Similarly, like today, a Cuddesdon ordinand mounted the steps in this very pulpit and started their sermon. Like today for me, it was also their final Sunday at Mary Mags after a placement with Richard Holloway. It was their farewell sermon in this place. I'm not sure, but it may even be that some people here today remember the occasion of which I am talking.

However, I hope this is where the similarities end...for only five weeks later, the ordinand in question died in the John Radcliffe. Although no one talked about it at the time, that Cuddesdon ordinand died of pneumonia as a result of AIDS.

So, it was not only their farewell sermon at Mary Mags but the last ever sermon they were to preach. And reading a copy of the sermon, as I have done, it is clear that ordinand knew he was dying as he preached that day. He took as his text a passage from the Gospel of John but one chapter before today's Gospel reading.

He told the congregation, "let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid...You heard me say to you, 'I go away...If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father.'"

He then said this: “the pain of leave-taking and the emptiness of the grief that comes after it are real parts of our human experience... There is wonderful healing in remembrance: the fond recalling of times past, of shared experiences which were both happy and painful. As Jesus left us the Holy Eucharist to recall him in our lives, so too, the Holy Spirit leaves us the memories of our beloved. There is a help to our adjustment to loss in remembering. Memories can be a sacrament to help us become a new person. Memories, used properly, can be an extension of the gifts of the Holy Ghost: wisdom, counsel and understanding.”

It seems to me that ordinand would have made a good priest had he lived. Someone in whom it might have been said that God is glorified.

Indeed, in his final sermon, echoing today's reading from Acts the 14th chapter, he also appears to be someone eager to strengthen the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

So what might that ordinand, in his wisdom and affection, have made of our Gospel reading today?

Coming as it does on the heels of Judas leaving the other disciples at the last supper to betray Jesus, this is something of an extraordinary moment in the text. We know what is coming and we know what Judas is about to do. Yet, what will Jesus say?

His response is to turn attention to the glory that is to come. He points towards his own death and resurrection that is now but hours away. Through these events God will be glorified in Christ.

And he is preparing the disciples for this reality and giving them instruction to love one another.

The so-called New Commandment.

The new commandment in this text -- to love one another -- is arguably one of the more famous biblical statements.

Even folks who are not active participants in the church know this commandment or ones similar to it. But is it new?

Hardly.

Loving one another is part of Jewish tradition, is present in the Greco-Roman world around them, and is seen in other religious traditions as well.

Loving those with whom we agree or are partial to is the easy part. Loving the rest of the people we come in contact with is a much harder proposition.

But this will not be news to those sitting in the pews of most churches. It is a part of the human condition to love and to want to be loved. Reality is ... it's easier to love those who are more loving and lovable.

In Jerome's commentary on the Galatians, it is claimed that John the Evangelist (the Gospel writer), in his old age, would remind those around him to love one another. When questioned why he told them this so very often, his reply would be, "Because it is what our Lord commanded. If it is all you do, then it is enough." For Jesus, love did not mean a sweet sentimental feeling. It meant action. It meant actively loving -- putting one's love into real world doing.

This new commandment comes as part of a farewell address by Jesus to his followers. And he does this with a sense of tenderness and mercy. The address to "children" is only used here (verse 33). It is a touching reminder that the end of Jesus' time on earth will soon come, but he does this fully aware of the dismay it will cause. He even acknowledges that the immediate impact of his

glorification through death and resurrection will mean his absence from them. And into this reality he leaves them this command and tells them they will only have him for a little while longer.

He commands the disciples to love one another, but he also reminds them that they will continue to feel his presence despite the fact that he will not be with them. They will exhibit their discipleship by doing what he commands: by loving one another as he loved them.

Here is an opportunity this week to talk about the requirement – the obligation - of love. We so often draw lines about who we will love and who we will be tempted to cast in the role of “less loving” in our lives. This happens in the hearts and minds of both individuals -- and the church. An interesting thing to note in this text is that Jesus is reminding the disciples that they will be known to others by their acts of loving (verse 35). We would do well to listen to this commandment.

We also are called to love others as a mark of our own discipleship. The way Jesus talks about loving each other is a precursor of the spread of Christianity. As he loved and that love spread within his inner circle, so too will love spread after he is gone when love is done in his name. This act, to love others, is a distinguishing mark of the followers of Christ then and will continue to be.

Some would say that one of the weaknesses of the church today is the way many Christians do not embody this commandment -- or the others -- commanding his followers to love their neighbour. Perhaps, at times, even a challenge for us here. Although as today I take my leave from you, I have noticed much love in this place.

Jesus makes plain his call to the disciples. "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples -- when they see the love you have for each other."

Jesus was bold and clear then. How much clearer do we need Jesus to be for our own lives of discipleship now?

That other Cuddesdon ordinand, knew only too well of this command.

Before beginning his theological training, he worked as a lay chaplain in a hospital in Downtown New York. It was 1984. The depths of the AIDS crisis.

Here he sat with the dying and offered them the final dignity of presence, of touch, and of stomach-wrenching love. He then began his journey towards ordination that he never completed. In fact, he collapsed just after Richard Holloway's episcopal ordination in Edinburgh before being moved to Oxford.

Today, if you are so moved, you can visit his memorial tree at Cuddesdon.

Fr. Peter kindly attended the blessing in Michaelmas Term where, rather emotionally, we told his story – his true story – for the first time. And we prayed for him, and for all clergy and ministers who have been affected by HIV and AIDS.

And, we recommitted ourselves to that God who, not just in the New Jerusalem, but now also, will dwell with us and we shall be his people. He will wipe our tears away, death will be no more, no more mourning, or crying, or pain. Or goodbyes.

For if we are quiet from time to time, and listen and wait, we might hear that voice one again: “Behold, I make all things new.”

May all the faithful departed rest in peace...and rise in glory. Amen.