

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 97 (96); Apocalypse 22:12-14,16-17,20; John 17:20-26

I ask that they may all be one

John 17:20 [Jesus said:] “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

John 17:25 “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

John 17 is a kind of Cinderella chapter. The writer chose to bring Jesus’ final discourse to a climax with these verses and yet they are read only on seventh Sunday of Easter. Because so many places now celebrate the Ascension on that the Sunday, the chapter is almost never proclaimed on Sundays.

This a pity for the chapter as a whole but especially for these final few paragraphs. However, John 17 is read during the seventh week of Easter on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, using the same divisions as in years A, B and C.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole of John 13-17 belongs to the genre of Farewell Discourse. The final chapter takes the following steps:

- i) Jesus prays for his glorification and describes eternal life (1-5)
- ii) The beginning of eternal life in the

- disciples (6-8)
- iii) Jesus prays for his disciples (9-19)
- iv) Jesus prays for future believers (20-24)
- v) Jesus concludes his prayer (25-26)

The portions appointed for this Sunday are accordingly the final two units, verses 20-26. All of John 17 is in some degree inspired by the Lord’s Prayer.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? There is no other god besides me, a *righteous God* and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. (Isaiah 45:21)

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, you who test the minds and hearts, O *righteous God*. (Psalm 7:9)

For the LORD is righteous. (Psalm 11:7; 119:137; 129:4)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him. (John 14:1-7)

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. (John 14:21)

Thought for the day

Sometimes the simpler, the deeper and the deeper, the simpler. John’s Gospel illustrates this: using no technical or esoteric vocabulary, the writer nevertheless manages hold before us God, the beyond in the midst, in the happy phrase of Bonhoeffer.

In some senses, the deepest reality is also the simplest. *Love is our origin. Love is our constant calling. Love is our fulfilment in heaven.* None of the mystery is lost and yet none of the love is missed. The writer orientates us towards the Mystery, lost in wonder love and praise.

Prayer

God, help us recognise you, the divine beyond in the midst of the everyday reality. Spirit, inspire in us to see the God of love in everyone and everything. Jesus, be with us always to the end of the age. To you be the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

ST PAUL

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. (Romans 15:7-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 20 “Those who will believe” translates a present participle in Greek but the meaning is probably future, pointing to the increasingly Gentile reality of the Jesus movement. Their “word” reflects a very early tradition meaning the Gospel about Jesus. See also John 4:39 and 20:29.

Verse 21 The insistence upon love and unity is quite revealing about the real state of things. The John community comprised quite diverse groups: followers of John the Baptist, Pharisees, Samaritans and Gentiles. As in any healthy community, there was conflict.

MATTHEW 6:9-13	THE LORD'S PRAYER EMBEDDED IN JOHN 17
Our Father	My father and your Father (John 20:17). Father! (John 11:41; 12:27-28; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 26)
in heaven	Jesus looked up to heaven (John 11:41); Living his eyes to heaven (John 17:1)
may your name be honoured	Glorify your name (John 12:28); My Father is honoured by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples. (John 15:8)
may your kingdom come	Unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3); Unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)
may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven	For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. (John 6:38)
Give us today our daily bread	Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work. (John 4:34); my Father is giving you the true bread from heaven. (John 6:32); Sir, give us this bread all the time! (John 6:34)
and forgive us our debts	Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)
as we ourselves have forgiven our debtors	"I give you a new commandment—to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35) Cf. John 15:12, 17.
And do not lead us into temptation, ¹⁹ but deliver us from the evil one	Keep them safe in your name that you have given me (John 17:11); When I was with them I kept them safe and watched over them in your name that you have given me. (John 17:12); I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them safe from the evil one. (John 17:15)

Hence the intercession that they *may* all be one.

For "as," the Gospel uses the Greek adverb *kathōs*, which means far more than merely being inspired by or replicating the love of Jesus. In key places in this Gospel, *kathōs* means that the sending, the serving, the loving, the self-giving of Jesus are continued immediately and directly in the sending, serving, loving and self-giving of true disciples. Our mission is literally his mission.

The desired unity is not a matter of compatibility or politics or compromise. On the contrary, the community draws its unity from the unity of the Father and the Son. This unity is not simply a desideratum, it also has an evangelical purpose: *that the world may believe*. See also John 17:8, 25.

Verse 22 Glory, in this Gospel, belongs to the category of revelation. Jesus was glorified in his death and resurrection, meaning that the very heart of God was disclosed through the lifting up. In this Gospel, God *serves humanity* and reveals himself as lover, to an astonishing, in-

credible degree. This "glory" has been given to all believers, so that they too may continue to disclose God through their love, service and self-giving. The oneness of the community flows directly from their faith and their mission.

Verse 23 The triple weave of this love is elusively hinted at: the threads can be distinguished (Father, Son and believers) but cannot be separated. Once again, this love has a purpose beyond the community: so that the world may know. The little word "as" (*kathōs*) is used again, revealing the one love of the Father for the Son and for all who believe in him. The reader will not forget to recall John 3:16 at this point. See also 14:21, 23 and 16:27.

Verse 24 In this Gospel, the early Christian tension towards the end of time has been relaxed and scholars speak of realised eschatology (the presence moment of salvation). But even so, there is a future, already made clear in John 14:1-7 (see above; 12:26; 14:3).

Again, glory points not to "honour and glory" but to being and identity dis-

closed in Jesus. Behind it stands not the Greek concept of *doxa* (glory as appearance) but the Hebrew concept of *kābôd* (glory as substance, weight or importance). See John 17:5. The intricate 24c means that love, identity, disclosure and creation are all bound up together. Before the foundation of the world takes the reader back to the Prologue of the Gospel (see John 1:1 above) and the pre-existence of the Word.

Verse 25 Various forms of "to know" and "to love" appear in prodigal fashion in these final verses. To know means more than to be acquainted with or to have information about. Instead, "know" points to an interpersonal knowledge, the way Adam "knew" his wife in Genesis 4:1, even though they had already been introduced! A loving knowledge is intended, a far deeper reality. On Jesus' lips "I know you" can only mean "I love you." Even 25b cannot mean simply they have information — rather they have become wholeheartedly convinced of this reality with their entire being.

Verse 26 Name points to the person, not simply a title. Jesus has disclosed the Father, and this disclosure is a disclosure of love. "I will make it known" is a kind of future continuous, "I will continue to make it known."

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Conflict is normal and but so is the desire for harmony and unity. How have I personally negotiated this tension as a person of faith and prayer?

2. Love should be our great calling card as Christians (as the song puts it: "they will know we are Christians by our love." Well, would they?)

3. Do I find myself moved and attracted by the visionary mysticism of John's Gospel — do I find myself drawn to it from deeply within self?

PRAYER

Father, righteous one, your beloved Son prayed that his disciples in every generation might be one as you and he are one. Look upon this assembly gathered in his name. Fulfil in us the prayer of Jesus and crown our celebration of this paschal season with your Spirit's gift of unity and love.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

Rev 22:12 “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15 *Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

16 “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our exploration of the New Testament Apocalypse comes to a close today, with the closing blessings and invitations. After the cosmic struggle between good and evil, it is a relief to come to these final welcoming verses.

KIND OF WRITING

Our excerpt is part of the extended Epilogue and Benediction in 22:6b-21, combining several kinds of writing: a final affirmation by the risen Lord; a blessing and a curse (omitted in the lectionary), a further identification of Jesus followed by a wider invitation. These last few verses function as a *peroratio*, that is, a synthesis of summary, amplification and final appeal to the emotions. Readers of the time would not have been surprised to see these closing sentiments.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Like all apocalyptic, the context is one of general harassment, even persecution, for faith. The concrete issue is Emperor worship, deeply embedded socially and culturally and thus really hard to avoid. At this point, we are at the end of the book, and so final reassurances are given in a tone of invitation but also warning.

RELATED PASSAGES

Revelation is highly “intertextual” as can be seen in these representative passages.

“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophe-

cy of this book.” (Revelation 22:7)

I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. (Revelation 1:17–18)

See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. (Revelation 5:5)

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel. (Numbers 24:17)

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:14)

To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7)

To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. (Revelation 2:28)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 It is Christ who is speaking here, affirming what the angel said in Revelation 22:7. Works, here, means witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus himself (2:2, 5, 6, 19, 23, 26; 3:1, 2, 8, 15). for the final judgment see Revelation 20:12-13.

Verse 13 In an expression previously applied only to God (1:8; 21:6), Jesus now describes himself. Cf. Isaiah 44:6; 48:12. This is the highest identification of Jesus with God in the New Testament. He is now in charge of history.

Verse 14 This is the seventh and final beatitude of the Apocalypse (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Seven is not an accident and these beatitudes put before us what the writer really wanted his hearers to hear. The washing of robes takes us back to 7:14 and the blood of the Lamb. The tree of life, from Genesis, is referred to a few times: Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19. The city is the New Jerusalem, just described.

Verse 15 This exclusionary curse reflects the binary world of the Apocalypse and serves as a warning. It is omitted in the lectionary excerpt, for pastoral reasons.

Verse 16 The angel sent to the churches reminds us of the *Letters to the Seven Churches* in chapters 2-3. The root of David, a symbol of fidelity, takes us back particularly to 5:5 and generally to the foundational Liturgy in chapters 4-5. The one who is the bright morning star also gives the gift of the bright morning star in Revelation 2:28. As noted earlier in the book, the revelation from God goes to Christ to the angel to the seer to the community.

Verse 17 The Spirit of God now speaks (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 14:13) in a kind of liturgical responsory, picking up the worship setting of the whole book. The bride (Revelation 21:9-22:9) is the holy city, Jerusalem, in strong contrast to Rome, the whore of Babylon. Emperor worship was the ideology of the day and it took courage to resist. The invitation is then broadened to everyone — everyone who hears or thirsts or simply wishes to take the water of life. The nuptial imagery is an echo of the bridal imager in John 2-4, where it is also paired with water as a symbol. The thirsty are not those on any “spiritual journey” but those who specifically need and desire the eschatological relationship with Jesus. In brief, the ones who hear are the ones who conquer, because the “hearers” are those who have heard, converted, obeyed, and thus witnessed. Finally, it is all gift and grace!

From the related passages and commentary, it is evident that these verses offer a summary, an amplification and an appeal to the emotions. Anyone who has got this far in the book or in its liturgical performance will not be unmoved.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The reassurance of the Apocalypse is profound, a dramatised version of “I will be with you always.” How have I needed such a message and in what circumstances?
2. Let the repeated invitation, “come,” resonate in your heart. Who is saying this *to you at this point in your life*?
3. We are all “hearers of the word,” called to conversion, obedience and faithful witness.

PRAYER

Eternally faithful God, you have disclosed your faithfulness to us through the faithfulness of Jesus, your Son. With the gift of the Spirit, stir up in each of us a desire to be faithful to you in everything, in all that I am and in all that I do. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven

Acts 7:55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” 57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died (*ekoimēthē*).

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Having arrived at Acts 15 last Sunday, we now go back to Acts 7, for the witness of Stephen. There are two keys for understanding this reading. (i) Stephen’s witness (= *martyrion* in Greek) is inspired by the Spirit; (ii) the manner of Stephen’s death purposefully echoes that of Jesus himself in Luke’s Gospel. The example of costly witness comes before the feast of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit who enables us to be witnesses.

KIND OF WRITING

The importance of the story of Stephen and his speech is clear because the location and length of the story. It is part of a longer, somewhat concentric sequence in Acts 6:1-8:3, as follows:

1. The appointment of the Seven
2. The accusation against Stephen
3. The speech of Steven
4. *The death of Stephen*
5. The persecution which followed

- A. Community and conflict
- B. Accusation
- C. Defence
- B*. *Killing*
- A*. Community and persecution

ORIGEN OF THE READING

Stephen, like Jesus in the Third Gospel, dies the death of an innocent martyr and thus takes his place as yet another example of a prophet who, because he spoke of “the coming of the Righteous One” (Acts 7:52), is the victim of “stiff-necked people” who continue to persecute the representatives of God. It pat-

terns the destiny of the true witness on Jesus’ own destiny.

RELATED PASSAGES

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. (Daniel 7:13 NRSV adjusted)

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12:11–12)

Jesus replied, “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” (Luke 22:67–69)

They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. (Luke 4:29)

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last (*exepneusen*). (Luke 23:46)

Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 55 The scene is in Jerusalem, during the trial. Filled with the Spirit Stephen has a vision of Jesus, a fulfilment of Luke 22:69. Standing *on the right* echoes Psalm 110:2 and Daniel 7:13. Jesus stands rather than sits (as in the Psalm) because he is risen from the dead. The inspiration of the Spirit at this point is a fulfilment of Luke 12:11-12 above.

Verse 56 Stephen reports the vision, because his accusers have not seen what he saw.

Verse 57 The rush against Stephen echoes Luke 4:29, from the *tableau* of Luke 4:16-30, which prefigures the en-

tire career of Jesus, including his death and resurrection.

Verse 58 Taking him out of the city echoes Luke 4:29 once more and also anticipates Acts 13:50 and 16:37. *Outside the city* conforms to the rules for those who blaspheme in Leviticus 24:14 and Numbers 15:35-36. Saul is slipped in here for the first time, in a story which reflects his own account in 1 Corinthians 15:8, Galatians 1:13 and Philippians 3:6. The witnesses are the *martyres*, the literal meaning of the word, though an ironic reference to later Gospel witnesses cannot be excluded. Our English word martyr meant originally witness and only later came to mean someone who bore witness *with their life*.

Verse 59 Jesus prayed Psalm 31:5, a prayer of trust, to the Father, while Stephen entrusts himself to Jesus.

Verse 60 The loud voice also echoes the death of Jesus in Luke. More importantly, the prayer for forgiveness obeys Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6:37, as well as echoing his death in Luke 23:34 (a disputed text). There is a final point of contrast. When Jesus dies in Luke, it says literally he expired, meaning the *breath* or *Spirit* went out of him. In the case of Stephen, he falls asleep — the common metaphor for death in the culture, with a new depth of meaning because Jesus is the first fruits of *all who have fallen asleep*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The bearing of witness can be dramatic, as in the Stephen story, or more ordinary, as in our everyday experience. When have you felt the power of the Spirit, helping you to say the right words at the right time?
2. Sometimes an experience or even the memory of it can give us courage when we need it. It does not have to be a “vision” — any moment of presence or insight would do.
3. Stephen ends his life with a great act of trust in Jesus, risen from the dead. Let us hope that we can do the same.

PRAYER

God of every consolation and encouragement, in our day we are called to be witnesses to what we believe, to you yourself, to Jesus risen from the dead. Send us your Spirit so that we do not have to worry about what to say and when to say it but rather let the Spirit speak through us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.