

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Acts 14:21-27; Psalm 145 (144); Apocalypse 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another

John 13:31 When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”



INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The commandment to love God and your neighbour, taken from the Hebrew bible, is given by Jesus in Mark 12 as the “greatest commandment.” Our text today reflects the reception of this tradition in the Johannine community and literature, where it receives a unique profile.

KIND OF WRITING

In the Fourth Gospel, chapters 14-17 belong to the literary genre of the final speech of the hero, his or her last will and testament. The farewell speech is well-established as a literary genre in the OT and the apocryphal books of the intertestamental period. There are numerous examples, like the blessings of Jacob to his children in Gen 47:29-49:33, the farewell of Joshua to the nation of Israel in Josh 22-24, and David’s farewell speech in 1 Chr 28-29. In the OT apocrypha we have the farewell speech of Tobit from his deathbed in Tobit 14:3-11. The entire Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is made up of farewell speeches patterned after Jacob’s in Genesis. The book of Jubilees gives farewell speeches for Noah (ch. 10), Abraham (chs. 20-22), and Rebecca and Isaac (chs. 35-36). Josephus

includes a farewell address for Moses. In the NT, Paul makes a farewell speech to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:17-38, and the Pastoral Epistles in their entirety might be thought of as farewells, especially 2 Timothy. Correspondingly, 2 Peter is Peter’s farewell discourse.

The common situation in almost all of these instances is that of a prominent person who gathers his followers (children, disciples, or the entire nation of Israel) just before his death or departure to give them final instructions, which will help them after he is gone.

In our passage, Jesus speaks of his death (glorification in this Gospel) and how the “little children” are to love one another after he has gone. The material in Jn 14-17 is, of course, not historical but gives us the fruit of profound meditation on the deep meaning of Jesus, as disclosed to the Johannine community, through the great religious genius who was its founder and guide.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There are three Old Testament backgrounds this passage.

(a) Glory refers to God’s presence in the Temple, which was both immanent (here and now) and transcendent (beyond). One example: *Then the cloud covered the tent*

Thought for the day

According to the song, “the greatest thing you’ll ever learn is to love and be loved in return.” In our better moments, we all know this to be *the* truth about our human being. For believers, it is no surprise that the very thing we need most stands at the centre of the Christian faith: God *is* love. The match between our need and God’s disclosure is perfect. If we took that really to heart, many things would change: our practice of prayer, our relationships, our joy in believing, our way of sharing our faith, our living of discipleship. All we need is love. The astonishing servant love of God in Jesus is exactly we most need.

Prayer

You are love itself and yet we hesitate. Open our inner selves to your gracious loving, that we may ourselves as beloved and being loved we may learn to love in return. Amen.

of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40:34-35)

(b) Son of Man is a term taken from the book of Daniel where it refers not simply to a human being (the usual meaning) but to the agent of God’s final salvation to all humanity. In this sense, it was definitely used by the historical Jesus in reference to himself.

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

(c) Love as the great commandment is given in Deuteronomy (the Shema Yisrael) and Leviticus: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. (Lev 19:18)*

All three references are significant: God's glory is now shown in the final love of Jesus, in his lifting up on the cross into resurrection, making him the saviour; by his gift of himself we are enabled to love just as he loved.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(a) "To glorify" is used in the Fourth Gospel to refer to the revelation of God's inner self, which will be brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus (his lifting up). As we saw above, the term can also mean God's immanence and transcendence in the incarnate Word (who "tentled among us", whose "glory we have seen"). The hour of glory is announced by Jesus in John 12:23: Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

(b) The historical Jesus summarised the commandments into two, love of God and love of neighbour, in Mark 12:28-34 (||s in Matt 22:34-40 and Lk 10:25-28). This summary is echoed widely across New Testament documents. For example: "You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (James 2:8; several times in Paul).

(c) In the Fourth Gospel itself, the command to love is given high profile, so that it becomes really *the only ethical requirement* of the community (8-5-13-37). The formulation to love one another recurs in Jn 15:12, 17 and in 1 Jn 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-13; 2 Jn 5.

ST PAUL

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Romans 13:9)

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Gal 5:14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 31 The departure of Judas is the signal for a more direct and essential teaching to the disciples. Notice the past tense—we are dealing with a Johannine expression of faith from the end of first century ad. Jesus, the agent of God's final salvation, has been lifted up on the cross (John 3) and in the lifting up, God's own "glory", his loving inner self was revealed.

Verse 32 The tense changes from the

past (the point of view of the faith community) to the future (the point of view of Jesus' giving his last will and testament). "At once" (only 3x in Jn) is used again at the cross: "at once, blood and water flowed out".

Verse 33 "Little children", a term taken from the Johannine community (x1 in John, here, and x7 in 1 John), is especially affectionate. "Looking for" Jesus has been a feature of this Gospel from the start. "Going": cf. Jesus then said, "I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." (John 7:33-34) Again he said to them, "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." (John 8:21)

Verse 34 New commandment: cf. Jn 15:12, 17. The writer knows this commandment is both new and old (from Deuteronomy and Leviticus): Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. (1 John 2:7-8)

It is old in its form. It is new in the Christian dispensation, because of the radical depth of love shown in Christ, which also makes the commandment (newly) possible in an absolutely new way. The tiny expression "just as" is vital here. As elsewhere in this Gospel (20:21), it means more than "on the model of Jesus"; rather, by means of Jesus' loving us or on the strength of Jesus' love, we are enabled to love as he loved.

Verse 35 The insistence on love as the distinguishing mark of the Christians is found extensively in the New Testament.

As is well known, there are three expressions for love in Greek: *philia* (friendship); *eros* (attraction between the sexes); *agapē* (unrestricted, indiscriminate seeking of the other's well-being, without expectation of reward).

See Benedict XVI, *God is Love*. *Agapē*, the last above, is used in the New Testament in a distinctively Christian way.

Of course, behind the idealisation lies the reality that the Johannine community, full of tensions and splits, needed to hear this commandment again and

again (as we do too)!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Judas leaves and Jesus announces that the moment has come for God's power to be made manifest. This is unexpected at a moment of imminent betrayal. Have there been times for you when the power of God was made manifest in strange circumstances?

2. 'I shall not be with you much longer.' Jesus announces a parting of the ways. There are places we have to go in life where others cannot come with us. There are places others have to go and we cannot accompany them. When have you experienced this going on alone as necessary for a fuller life for yourself, or for someone else?

3. Jesus proclaims love as the distinguishing characteristic of his followers. Have there been times when reaching out to others has heightened your sense of walking in the footsteps of Jesus?

4. Who are the individuals or communities whose love for one another and for others has been a witness to you?

PRAYER

We behold your glory, in the love shown by your Son, lifted up on the cross and exalted on high.

Increase our love for one another; that both in name and in truth we may be disciples of the risen Lord Jesus and so reflect in our lives the glory that is yours.

We ask this through 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.

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.

It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evening, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.

Attributed to Pedro Arrupe, SJ
(1907-1991)

The home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them as their God

Rev 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Rev 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Apocalypse can be a very difficult book. Fortunately, the final chapters are extraordinarily poetic and uplifting. The words go straight to the heart of the matter and to the heart of the human condition.

KIND OF WRITING

In terms of the overall book, we find ourselves in the final vision of the new Jerusalem. Today, we read the first part of that vision.

II. Vision in the spirit 4:1-22:5

The scroll with seven seals 6:1-11:19

The first six seals 6:1-17

The 144,000 7:1-17

The seventh seal 8:1-11:19

The open scroll 12:1-22:5

The woman 12:1-18

Chaos unleashed 13:1-18

End time vision 14:1-20

The seven bowls 15:1-16:20

Vision of Babylon 17:1-19:10

The last things 19:11-20:21

Vision of Jerusalem 21:1-22:5

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context in the community is the time after the destruction of the actual city of Jerusalem, a time marked by a certain alienation or homelessness. The convictions of the believers made them

feel not at all “at home” in the Empire. The final chapters are full of references to the Old Testament, already regarded as the Word of God, thus lending tremendous authority to the final affirmations.

RELATED PASSAGES

We note here the related passages from the Hebrew Bible, essential as a key to what the writer is teaching.

New heaven and new earth: Is 65:17-19; 66:22.

As a bride: Is 49:18; 52:1; 54:5; 61:10; 62:4-5 etc.

God's home: Exod 6:7; 25:8; 29:45; Lev 26:11-12; 1 Kings 6:13; Ezek 37:27; 43:7; Zech 2:14; 8:8; 13:9.

Tears: Is 25:8; 30:19; 35:10; 51:11; 60:20; 61:3; 65:18-19; Jer 31:12-13; Hos 13:14.

Things new: Ps 104:30; Is 42:9; 43:19; 48:6; 65:17; Ezek 36:26.

Write this: Hab 2:2.

The prophets were clearly important for this writer, especially Isaiah, the “fifth evangelist.”

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The brusque dissolution of the first heaven and the first earth might seem to augur ill for a theology of care of creation. It is, however, figurative and the text speaks rather of the end time renewal of creation and the fulfilment of prophecies such as those of Isaiah above. This radical transformation of the cosmos includes the radical transformation of its inhabitants too. Such radical renewal had already started in the resurrection of Jesus, understood as the first instalment of the end time realities.

The sea, too, is figurative. In the Apocalypse it refers to the forces of chaos and death, in four senses: (i) the origin of cosmic evil; (ii) unbelieving people; (iii) the place of the dead; (iv) the location of idolatrous imperial trade. The metaphorical disappearance of the sea thus means the vanquishing of evil will be absolute. Thus the sea will not be any longer just as death will not be no more.

Verse 2 This new metaphor comes from Isaiah 52:1-10. The nuptial imagery has a wide basis in the OT. Cf. Is 62:1-10. The “holy city” is also taken from Isaiah 62. The descent of the new

creation brings about the replacement of the old. Cf. Gal. 4:26-31; Heb. 12:22 cf. Phil. 3:20; also in Jewish apocalyptic writings such as 4 Ezra 7:26; 10:25-27, 41-44, 49-55; 2 En. 55:2. Behind the imagery stands God's promise of final salvation and righteousness.

Verse 3 Symbolically, this proclamation comes *from God himself*. See the box alongside for a list of the biblical references. There are echoes especially of Ezekiel and his image of the end-time temple, in which God will dwell among the children of Israel for ever. Cf. *I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.* (Ezekiel 37:26-28) This time, however, the divine presence or *Shekhinah* is not limited to any physical temple.

Verse 4 Total peace and relief are promised, based on key citations from the OT. *Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:8) For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.* (Isaiah 65:17)

Verse 5 This verse starts a wider discussion in vv. 5-8. Note that the author adds the word “all” to indicate that the fulfilment of Isaiah is complete. A title for Jesus in the Apocalypse is “the faithful and true witness” echoed here in the message from the throne. Utter reliability, total faithfulness!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. God is, in the words of Bonhoeffer, “the beyond in the midst.” What is your experience of the nearness of The Mystery?

2. Our text contains unlimited reassurance—quite remarkably unrestricted. Such grace is ours to embrace, to enjoy, to live.

PRAYER

God of surprises, surprise us again with your vision of future life and new hope. We need your message as never before. Overcome our hesitation and help us to embrace your faithful love to all.

It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God

Acts 14:21 After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. 22 There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.” 23 And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

Acts 14:24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. 27 When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Last Sunday, we heard the start of this First Missionary Journey (only in Acts). Today we hear the conclusion of that Gospel outreach in a some-what hectic concatenation of places and people. In our time, the energy and apparent success may sound enviable.

KIND OF WRITING

The excerpt combines two literary phenomena familiar from the Acts: summary statements and travelogues.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The First Missionary Journey is recounted in Acts 13:1-14:38. Many places and people are covered, but in reality four large scenes form the substance of the tale. (1) Salamis: 13:4-12; (2) Antioch in Pisidia: 13:14-53; (3) Iconium (14:1-7) and (4) Lystra (14:8-20a).

RELATED PASSAGES

Antioch was a very important centre in early Christianity. In its day, it was the third largest city (300k inhabitants) in the Roman Empire, after Rome (1m) and Alexandria (500k) in Egypt. A large Jewish population made it a centre of faith and scholarship, as we know from the Talmud and Josephus, but also the

Chronographia of Malalas.

There were no fewer than sixteen cities named Antioch founded by Seleucus I Nicator. Two are important for early Christianity: Antioch in (or near) Pisidia and Antioch in Syria (Antioch-on-the-Orontes). Somewhat confusingly, both are mentioned in our reading today.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 21 Derbe is meant. Nothing is known of what happened in Derbe and even the site itself has not been excavated. This Antioch is in Pisidia.

Verse 22 “Strengthening” is a typical activity of the Apostles. Cf. 15:41 (Syria and Cilicia); 18:43 (Galatia and Phrygia); 16:5 (general summary). Another word used in the same context is “encouraging”, which links the Pauline and Petrine missions. The content is given in brief form in v. 22: persecutions are the path of entry to the kingdom. Cf. Acts 9:16.

Verse 23 Elders as a term for church leaders first occurs in Acts 11:30. Prayer (Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42; 3:1; 4:31; 6:4, 6; 7:59; 8:15, 22, 24; 9:11, 40; 10:2, 4, 9, 30-31; 11:5; 12:5, 12; 13:3; 14:23; 16:13, 16, 25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 26:29; 27:29; 28:8) and fasting (Acts 13:2-3; 14:23; 27:9) are featured frequently in Acts.

Verse 24 Pisidia was a small administrative unit and its capital was Antioch. Paul turned to the Gentiles in Pisidia (Acts 13:46). Phrygia was an ethnic territory in the eastern part of the Roman province of Asia.

Verse 25 Perga was an important city in Pamphylia. In the Acts, it is there that John Mark and Paul parted company (Acts 13:13-14).

Verse 26 Attalia was a port city (modern Antalya), founded by and named after Attalus II Philadelphus of Pergamon (159-138 bc).

Verse 27 The work they completed was proclaiming the good news, making disciples, strengthening, exhorting and preparing for suffering. The original mandating runs: *Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of*

Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1-3)

Verse 27 Luke makes it explicit that it was not the achievement of the apostles but rather all that God had done with them. Cf. 15:4, 12. The door of faith is an unusual expression, but it does occur in Paul: *But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.* (1 Cor 16:8-9); *When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.* (2 Cor 2:12-13). There is even an echo in the Deutero-Pauline Letters: *At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.* (Col 4:3-4)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is my own source of energy for evangelisation? Is there a community of faith “behind” me?
2. Where do I see the open door of faith today, in spite of difficulties?

PRAYER

God of the good news of salvation, you entrust us with the word of life. As we meet indifference and opposition, open the door of faith for all in need of your love and compassion.

Show us how we can be true apostles not only in word but also in deed, so that many may be drawn to the beauty of the Gospel vision.

We ask this through Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



THE LITURGY

Acts 14:21-27; Psalm 145 (144); Apocalypse 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first and third readings are not particularly linked, as often happens in the lectionary in Eastertide. Perhaps the very last line of the Gospel hints at a connection: *'By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.'*

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 145 (144) takes up the theme of evangelising: They shall speak of the glory of your reign and declare your might, O God, to make known to men your mighty deeds and the glorious splendour of your reign..

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Acts 14:21-27

A major missionary outreach is brought to completion in today's reading. Because of all the place names—not fewer than eight!—it can sound a bit hectic. The reading ends with a great image for this Year of Faith: God opened a door of faith to the pagans.

Second Reading

Apocalypse 21:1-5

What will heaven be like? Today's reading portrays the New Jerusalem in words which really speak to the heart and meet our deepest needs.

Gospel

John 13:31-33, 34-35

What is at the centre of our lives as Christians? Love is all! God is love. God's love is shown in Jesus. We are loved and in return we love. The very thing which gives us greatest human happiness is the very thing which God ask of us, that we may come to know the happiness of God.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 19 May

Acts 14:5-18

The powerful events which accompanied the preaching could easily be mistaken in their origin. But as St Paul said, *For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus*

Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

John 14:20-26

The teaching of the Fourth Gospel on the Spirit is distinctive and relevant: The "advocate" will stand alongside us to reach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus said.

Tuesday 20 May

St Bernardine of Siena, priest

Acts 14:19-28

In our attempts at evangelisation today, we can still learn from the example of the first preachers: they took risks, were full of zeal and they knew God was with them all along.

John 14:27-31

Peace—the great gift of the risen Lord—means much more in the Bible than usual and especially here in John. It includes life in abundance, on account of the resurrection and even freedom from death and the fear of death.

Wednesday 21 May

St Christopher Magallanes and his Companions, Martyrs

Crístóbal Magallanes was born in 1869 in the Archdiocese of Guadalajara. During this time in Mexico's history, the government feared the power of the Catholic Church, and it tried to eliminate the practice of the faith and closed the seminaries. In 1915, Fr Magallanes opened his own small seminary in Totatiche and soon had more than a dozen students. He was on his way to celebrate Mass when he was arrested. Without a trial, he was convicted. On May 21, 1927, he and 21 other priests and three lay Catholics were executed.

Acts 15:1-6

Early Christians had to make up their minds whether or not to impose the full Jewish Law on new believers. It was not easy, as we see from today's reading which features supporters on each side.

John 15:1-8

In the Fourth Gospel, there are seven I AM sentences, all echoing the name of God as I AM WHO I AM. In the same way, the image of the vine for the people of God is rooted in the Old Testament, as well as in the parable of Jesus. We the

branches lives because of him.

Thursday 22 May

St Rita of Cascia OSA, religious

Acts 15:7-21

What about the imposition of the Jewish Law? Paul and James are shown, giving different arguments, both supporting a more free attitude. The basic principle is attractive and useful today: let's not make things more difficult for people who want to join us.

John 15:9-11

Today we hear a very short Gospel—short and rich. Who does not need the message of love? Who does not need the message of joy?

Friday 23 May

Acts 15:22-31

As a result of the various deliberations, a careful letter is written from Jerusalem. As you can hear, only one of the dietary laws as insisted upon—perhaps as a compromise.

John 15:12-17

The metaphor of the vine is dropped. With directness and simplicity, the writer takes us straight to the heart of the matter: love of neighbour — precisely because God is love and God has so loved the world.

Saturday 24 May

Acts 16:1-10

Today's reading is odd and inspiring. It is odd that Paul had someone circumcised, because he was so against it. It is inspiring that the same Paul dreams about the Macedonian Greeks who want him to preach among them. It would remind us of St Patrick and his dream about the Irish calling him to return.

John 15:18-21

It cannot be that our destiny should be different to that of Jesus. He too did not belong "this world" and he too was hated. It is to be expected that being a believer will incite others against us—a mark that we are on the path of true discipleship.