

7 Easter (A)
24 May, 2020

Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.
John 17:11

Jesus likes long goodbyes! Or so it would seem after hearing his so-called Farewell Discourse, part of which is the Prayer for his disciples, and the subject of today's gospel passage from John. In it Jesus pours out his heart to the Father for those he has lived with and taught and counseled and chastised and loved during his short time of earthly ministry.

So, on the eve of his Passion and Death and Resurrection 'before beginning the redemptive journey that ultimately will take him away from them' he tries to cover all the bases. He prays for their protection, for a strengthening of their still fragile faith. He prays for their joy in the midst of discouragement, their courage in the face of persecution, their acceptance of the trials and hardships that he knows will surely come after he's gone. One petition seems to remind him of still another, as his prayer becomes longer and more earnest, and as the time for parting draws ever more near.

When I read these portions of John, I sometimes think of the way my mother used to remind me of all the things I needed to remember as I set off to another day of grade school. You can guess how it was . . . As she was buttoning my coat and pulling down my cap, and pushing my lunch pail into my arms, she would keep up a steady stream of anxious advice. Do this. Avoid that. Listen to Sister Celeste. Forget about those older boys you're so much better than they are! Most of all, Be Careful!!

It was as though she was saying, I won't be physically present to keep you out of trouble. You'll be out of my sight the whole day. My love goes with you, but you'll have to think for yourself. You'll need to see the danger and the opportunities both on your own. I would nod vacantly, of course, after which she would add the most reassuring words, just as the school bus was pulling up, words I would take with me and take to heart always (although perhaps never admit to). She would say, 'Now, Gordon, I'll be praying for you.'

I think that's the sense in which Jesus is speaking of and about his disciples in today's gospel. That's the force and purpose of his desperate prayer. He knows that he is leaving them on their own, although he has promised to send them an Advocate, a Comforter, the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire them. But he knows too that, in the meantime at least, they're going to feel alone and bereft without him, without his physicality, his bodily presence which must have been compelling. We know nothing of what Jesus looked like, but we do know the effect he had on those who met him. He was someone people immediately were drawn to, someone they wanted to be near, to approach with trust, to see and to touch with joy.

Touching Jesus! that must have been an experience in itself. Think about it! The gospel writers tell us that people longed to touch him and so be healed, for they actually could feel power emanate from his hands, and even on one occasion from the hem of his robe! And this in addition to the power and pleasure that we find all the time in all of our senses. There is a furnace in our cells, writes the poet and sociologist Diane Ackerman; and when we breathe, we pass the world through our bodies, brew it lightly, and turn it loose again, gently altered for having known us. With Jesus, this process must have moved with miraculous speed and reach. And so, he knew they would miss, perhaps above all things, his touch.

And, for this reason, he might have already imagined the mingled look of fear and grief, wonder and loss in their eyes as they would trudge back from the place of his Ascension (what Luke describes in our first lesson from Acts). There they would be ordered away from their sky-gazing, their Jesus-dreaming, to face a world of some uncertainty, and a whole lot of peril! Without the face, without the hands, without the smile, without the tears (and, yes, without the laugh) without the touch 'of their incarnate Lord.

I've been thinking, then, of how much their experience of loss, their feelings of grief during that in-between time, in those long days of uncertainty and waiting prior to Pentecost, how these may resemble our own feelings in this time and under the conditions we now find ourselves. What I hear from so many of you, and from my colleagues, is the pain of physical separation. Simply put, we 're missing each other 's sensory presence. We 're missing each other's touch. What I'd give just to hug each of you right now, one of my clergy brothers tearfully exclaimed during last week 's webinar, and then go on and hug each member in my congregation! And, dear friends, I feel the same way.

Yet it is in times just such as these that Jesus does reach out his hands to touch us, and invites us to reach out our hands to touch him, and then go on to touch and heal and visit love upon another. This hand, this touch, this presence is not physical, nor can it be now and for a while. True, it is not gathered in physical community; it is not the connection we most desire. Still, there is a nearness that warms us, and a spirit that feeds us, because there is a life that dwells in us. And what dwells in us we also can make manifest in others 'through the touch of prayer, in words that are actions, in the hug of hope that we share over phone line or website; in masks we make and food we collect, in checks we write, and (maybe most of all) in the tender, abiding patience that we encourage in others and that we hold as tightly as we can, sensing all the while of what awaits us when this season of waiting ends.

For perhaps the strongest, most dynamic sense we possess, as Diane Ackerman goes on to describe 'even above all the others' is our sense of imagination. In sacred terms, it is our unique gifted human ability which allows us to envision a future that has been nourished all along by faith and so is grounded in a living memory of all that God has done for us. This means that what we cannot yet see, we know. What we cannot now with care touch, we hold. We are not bereft of human contact, not while we enfold each other in passionate, beckoning, devoted thought, not while our minds surround each other in ever-present love.

And so, we recall again why it is we believe. And so, we await a return that has, in a very real sense in our hearts and souls and in our memory already arrived. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +