

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on Easter 7 (8  
May 2005):  
Acts 1:1-14; 1 Peter 4:12-19; John 17:1-11*

## **Leaving Easter to Living More Nearly as We Pray**

*Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you; so that, just as you have given him power over all humanity, he may give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him..*  
*John 17:1-2: New Jerusalem Bible*

I know that it risks sounding irreverent, and I don't mean to be. However, whenever I hear the words of what is called Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," the part from this morning's gospel where Jesus speaks about his departure from the realms of history and expresses his relationship with the Father and his desire that we all be one – uttering sentiments such as 'I am in you and you are in me and those whom you have given me are all together' – whenever I hear this, it all begins to sound like a biblical version of the Beatles' singing "I Am the Walrus" coo-cuckah-choo! And I have to do battle with my tendency to drift away, wondering what does it mean? Where is the Good News?

I am quite sure that this is one reason that so many worshipping American like to choose their own weekly biblical content. At least they can always focus on what is biblically meaningful to them (what is "relevant") and not have to take the risk of coming up short with these seemingly obscure and apparently uninspiring scriptural texts. Specifically, I think of our young people who worship with us and have heard this gospel reading. I wonder if this text has lent more credence to their perspective that the Bible is a bunch of hooey and that church is boring. And if they bother to say as much to their parents, I wonder if the grown-ups in their lives have responses that go beyond "be quiet; eat it; it's good for you"?

Even for those of us who strive to honor the Bible and dearly love to be engaged seriously with its message, passages like this gospel can frustrate us. For try as we might, it is as if readings like this represent an impenetrable code, the secrets to which are evidently not available to ordinary people of faith -- like us.

So, does this gospel reading deserve our attention? And if so, how can we approach its meaning? And more pointedly, what might it be saying to us both on a gut level? And as we come to the end of Eastertide, might it illuminate the significance of our moving from the season of Resurrection into the season of discipleship?

Having begun this sermon the way I did, I need you to know that I do hear more than the Beatles' song, when Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" is read among us. But it has admittedly taken some work on my part. And the most helpful corrective stems from realizing that what St. John conveys to us in these scenes is Jesus at prayer.

Through the offices of the Fourth Gospel, we are, as it were, privy to a heavenly family conversation, eavesdropping on what the Incarnate Son says to the heavenly Father.<sup>[1]</sup> In this context and with these prayerful words, we are privileged to overhear the reality of resurrection being bequeathed to us.

In this prayer, couched within the style of a “last will and testimony,” we receive an immediate answer to this sermon’s opening questions: What matters about this reading? What is the Good News that touches us at a gut level? What does it say about being Easter people who have work to do in this world as Jesus’ disciples? In a word, the answer is “prayer.”

So, in this sermon, I want to take a brief look at prayer: to uncover its meaning; to remind us all of its power; and, as we seek to be Easter people in the world, to call us to the discipline of “living more nearly as we pray.”<sup>[2]</sup>

To begin, I want to say again that access to appreciating this morning’s gospel stems from understanding two things: that Jesus’ words amount to his “farewell speech” and that the gist of his saying “goodbye” comes in the form of a bequeathing prayer.

Most of us know the importance of having a will. It is how we wish our personal assets to be distributed upon our deaths. A will is an expression of how we want our life’s legacy used after we have died. In terms of this gospel taking the form of Jesus’ “last will and testimony,” it is telling to note what Jesus values as his legacy and what he wishes to distribute upon his death. Two themes predominate. One has to do with “glory,” and the other is “eternal life.”

Six times in eleven verses, Jesus uses some form of the word “glory” in his prayerful farewell. “Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you...” (John 17:1) “Glory” is not a word we usually hear or use outside the confines of worship. *Doxa* is “glory’s” Greek translation, from which English receives the term, “doxology,” for instance. Rather than being limited to that one familiar line from the hymn: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”) “Doxology” refers to the fundamental praise of God, and praise is the uncontrollable response all creation has, when it pays attention to the Creator of all that is. This is to say (along with Frederick Buechner) that “glory” is the outward manifestation of [God’s] handiwork, just as holiness is the inward manifestation.

Glory is to God what style is to an artist. To behold God’s glory, to sense his style, is the closest you can get to [the Holy One] this side of Paradise. So, glory is what God looks like when for the time being all you have to look at [God] with is a pair of eyes.<sup>[3]</sup>

*Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you; so that, just as you have given him power over all humanity, he may give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him.*

Of course, using our eyes to see what God “looks like” (“glory”) is most dramatically observed in Jesus cross and resurrection. In fact, above all else, this was the work of Jesus that glorified God, that revealed not only the “style of God” but also (quite literally and figuratively) the will of God.

The point is that we are not left to be on our own. There is much more to our lives than we can ask or imagine of them. And in Christ, God has made a timeless statement about what is really real: that death no longer has dominion; it is not the end. Therefore, in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we see the true glory of God: We see life on God’s irrefutable terms.

*We acclaim you, holy Lord, glorious in power. Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into our care, so that, in obedience to you, our Creator, we might rule and serve all your creatures. When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death... [but] to fulfill your purpose [Jesus, your own Son] gave himself up to death; and rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.*

Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer D, page 373-74

*Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you; so that, just as you have given him power over all humanity, he may give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him.*

The legacy of Jesus is to bequeath God’s glory to us, and (in the Christian tradition) we call this “gospel:” the Good News – often times expressed in terms of “eternal life.” Now, “eternal life,” rather than being misconstrued as “immortality” – never dying – has much more to do with God’s promise to God’s people that nothing will ever separate us from being in Communion with the Lord. As St. Paul has famously said: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

(I side-thought from this. Maybe if we kept our eye on the glorious prize of God’s Communion – which is Jesus’ legacy -- and treated it as a precious, life-saving gift – grace, then we might not be so fixated upon being “Left Behind” or so fearfully and disproportionately attached to issues of human sexuality.)

But, to make the point again, we see Jesus dealing with this legacy of communion in prayer. It seems reasonable that prayer is the vehicle by which you and I may receive Jesus’ “last will and testimony” because prayer is how we keep communion with God. As such, prayer is the glue of life.<sup>[4]</sup> It is how Communion is kept and strengthened and lived out. And here is the essential point.

When Kathleen Norris talks about prayer in her helpful little book, Amazing Grace, she mentions the ruminations of a sixth century monk, by the name of Dorotheus of Gaza. Dorotheus imagined the world of prayer as a great circle with God at the center and our

lives as lines, drawn from the circumference toward the center. From this model of prayer, Dorotheus observed that as the lines move toward God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.<sup>[5]</sup>

I think that this gets to the heart of what this morning's gospel portrays for us: That Jesus bequeaths his last will and testimony, giving those who are willing to receive his legacy the gift of Communion, which is what life with God is like, what we commonly call, "eternal life." And this gift, this legacy, when it is received, is lived through prayer, that is, by the tending of this Communion. And as we tend our Communion with God, two things happen. One touches who we are on the inside (a child of God); the other touches who we are on the outside (a member of Christ's community, his Body).

You and I cry out for Communion. We hunger for more than the emptiness the world gives. We long for the stability of knowing that we are loved, that we belong – no matter what. We seek to be connected with the life-giving power that can guide and shape us into our truest and best selves. And we know, from heart-breaking experience, that this is not about joining another "self-help" group; nor is it about spending all our time in church on our knees. For prayer is deeper than this. It is a way of life. It is an attitude of God-awareness. It is living Communion.

We are worshipping on the last of Easter's Sundays. Next week is Pentecost, where we move from the season of resurrection to the season of discipleship. If we have truly kept the feast of Easter and if we will dare to step across the line from hearing to doing Easter, then our lives will need to be characterized by prayer. We will need to tend the legacy of Communion that Christ has won for us in his death and resurrection.

And as we tend the fruit of this Easter life, we also share it. For as we move closer to God, we also find ourselves closer to one another, and that connection, in and of itself, might change all our lives.

So be it. Amen.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Raymond Brown, The Gospel According to John: XIII-XXI, page 747

<sup>[2]</sup> John Keble: a phrase from the last line from the text of Hymn 10 – Hymnal 1982

<sup>[3]</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, page 30

<sup>[4]</sup> Sentiments from John of Climacus (6<sup>th</sup> century monk), reference found in Kathleen Norris's: Amazing Grace, page 58f.

<sup>[5]</sup> Norris, Amazing Grace, page 59

