

the Sunday Readings



**“If you know me, then you will also know my Father.
From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.”**

(John 14:7)

5th SUNDAY of EASTER (a)

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'The Way' to the Father

life in the spirit/Spirit of Jesus – Part V ¹

introduction

The last verses of John's ch.11, mark the beginning of Jesus going up to Jerusalem. His disciples are troubled by this and Jesus asks them to deepen their belief in him. Believing in him is believing in GOD.² Thomas expresses his doubts despite Jesus' assurances and Jesus responds, "*I am the Way and the Truth and the Life*". We go to the Father through Jesus, who tells us that The Way is the practice of loving GOD and others. Such a path represents a daily urgent demand. Being with Jesus, is being with the Father. Life in the spirit/Spirit is somewhere between the old world that still seems to have vitality and authority and GOD's new world, voiced in today's readings.

From within our ordinary round of life we dare to voice the WORD of GOD. And like Peter we stand in fear and trembling when the WORD opens access to the real power for life-giving, or sanctifying grace. We also sense fear and feel the need to suppress change. We note too, our fearful society, which has few enough occasions for hosting the ambiguity we experience here when GOD's newness is given.

first reading: Acts 6:1-7 ³

[seven are chosen to serve the community]

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists, complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. (1) And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the WORD of GOD in order to wait on tables.(2) Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to the task,(3) while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."(4) What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.(5) They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them,(6) The WORD of GOD continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.(7)

1 Cover image: Christ and the Apostles Georges Rouault 1937-38, (detail).

2 *Jn.14:1*

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

Acts tells how the body of believers grew in number and tensions between the old ways and the new, began to affect the movement. The *Hellenists* were Israelites from outside Palestine. In Jerusalem, they had their own synagogues where the Scriptures were read in Greek. The *Hebrews* were Israelites who were native Palestinians. Their language was Aramaic, but the Scriptures were read in Hebrew in their synagogues.

The way the community's resources were being managed, brought matters to a head. The apostles publicly, '*put their weight behind*' or '*laid their hands on*' seven men. They were stand-ins for the apostles, to distribute food so the apostles could concentrate on prayer and preaching. In response to a growing community need, the apostles select and hand on responsibility to others for distributing food in the community. Among the seven was Stephen, the first martyr of the new movement (v.6). These Seven already possess the necessary *spirit/Spirit* and *wisdom* for the task (v.3).⁴ Stephen and the other six, who have the necessary qualities, are authorised to direct the daily distribution of food and to ensure the resources of the community are managed equitably on behalf of the disadvantaged (vv.2-3).

Later in *Acts*, Stephen takes on a different role. He confronts opponents of the new movement, "*filled with power and courage*".⁵ He preaches, teaches, witnesses, and interprets the claims of the Gospel. His preaching evokes a hostile response from a type of listener who, "*forever opposes the Holy Spirit*".⁶ All from the old world wanted to stop, silence and destroy the sanctifying grace unleashed by the resurrection of Jesus. The election of Stephen and others full of faith and the Holy Spirit is about the surprising and dangerous power of GOD's Spirit at work, bringing newness in society, through the actions of disciples who extend the work of Jesus.

response: Psalm 33 : 1 – 2, 4 – 5, 18 – 19

[the greatness and goodness of God]

*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.(1)
Praise the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to Him with the harp of ten strings.(2) . . .
For the WORD of the LORD is upright,
and all His work is done in faithfulness.(4)
The LORD loves righteousness and justice;
the Earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.(5) . . .
Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him,
on those who hope in His steadfast love,(18)
to deliver their soul from death,*

4 Neither the Israelite nor the Christian Scriptures knew of a rite of priestly ordination. Ministerial ordination is prior to and wider than what has come to be understood by priestly ordination today.

5 Ac.6:9ff

6 Ac.7:51

and to keep them alive in famine.(19)

A song about the new world that the LORD is creating. GOD presides over Creation with faithfulness. The appropriate response is to praise the Creator. The praise, in a new song, matches GOD's new world. GOD's WORD is, '*upright*' or, '*straightforward*' (v.4). The same word is used about the ones who praise (v.1) and the One to be praised. GOD is '*faithfulness*' or '*utter reliability*' (v.4b); GOD is '*justice*' which with '*righteousness*' is linked with GOD's commitment to the covenant. And GOD is '*steadfast love*' (v.5).

For the psalmist, creation is not confused with the Creator. Creation is an important witness to the Creator. A verdict about GOD's reliability is drawn out. The same verdict is drawn out about the world GOD has created. GOD's eye is on the faithful (v.18), who are afraid and hope in GOD's reliability and powerful loving. In other words, the trustful Israelite lives under GOD's watchful care. The divine Overseer is specially attentive on behalf of obedient ones. Creation faith draws together the claims of Torah religion. Other peoples may be left behind in their '*fears*', but the Israelites entertain a realistic hope.

second reading: 1 Peter 2 : 4 – 9

[the Living Stone and a Chosen People]

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in GOD's sight, and (4) like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to GOD through Jesus Christ.(5) For it stands in Scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."(6) To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"(7) and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the WORD, as they were destined to do.(8) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, GOD's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.(9)

The author underlines that all followers of Jesus belong to the priesthood of believers, by their baptism. Although, resident aliens in Asia Minor, they can become the elect and holy people of GOD – they can be, '*of the household*' of the spirit/Spirit. The author reminds the Christian community that although they are resident aliens in Asia Minor, Jesus was also rejected '*by the world*'. But he was valued by GOD (v.4b). Jesus is the centre and focus of their new lives. He is, '*a living stone*'. Christians too are, '*living stones*' built around '*the corner-stone*', to be a building for Christ's use.

The character and purpose of Jesus, shapes the life of the Christian community. The community is to be an utterly new people, formed through GOD's powerful purpose. The Christian community has a mediating role in the world; to

make healing contact possible between GOD and the world. Through the work of enormous love disobedient people have been reclaimed as GOD's beloved, faithful ones. Such a community has no right to exist, yet GOD has loved and re-loved this community into existence (v.9). The Christian community, or church, exists because of GOD's unconditional, community-creating love. The church is called to live differently in the world: as chosen; royal; holy; and GOD's own. It is no casual or accidental gathering of people. Rather it is a special community based on different realities and called to different conduct. Belief is an active decision to live distinctively in the world and such living threatens to turn the world on its head.

gospel reading: John 14:1-12

[Jesus 'the Way' to the Father]

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in GOD, believe also in me.(1) 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?(2) 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.(3) And you know the way to the place where I am going."(4) Thomas said to him, "LORD, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"(5) Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.(6) If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."(7) Philip said to him, "LORD, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."(8) Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (9) Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.(10) Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.(11) Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.(12)

According to John, Jesus talks about 'his departure' and about freeing his disciples from death. He had earlier spoken about the revelation of 'the glory of GOD' in his dying. What will happen to the disciples he leaves behind? Jesus speaks about humanity after death. We are all part of GOD's household (vv:1-3). He says GOD's house is very roomy – certainly large enough to accommodate all of humanity; all races, all civilizations, all ages and all planetary systems in the universe – maybe that is why he says there are, 'many living-places' (v.2). We are part of the household even after death if we are in the household while we are alive in the world.

Jesus says that if it was not necessary to think of another life in a survival after death, he would have been the first to tell us. When Thomas admits he

doesn't know where Jesus is going (v.5) Jesus responds, "*I am the Way; I am Truth and Life*" (v.6a). Jesus says that through him, disciples now know which is the place and what is the way to where he is going; he is THE WAY to GOD's household. It is the household of the unity of all, where all will live together and never die (v.6b). In the Israelite Scriptures, '*truth*' and '*justice*' are the same. Paul speaks of those who oppress the truth with injustice.

Jesus was speaking of two different things about GOD's household. On one hand, he spoke about life after death in GOD's household. On the other hand, he spoke about seeing GOD in GOD's own handiwork in this life. The evangelist says, '*No one has seen GOD*'. He didn't mean that no one has seen GOD in this life and that GOD can be seen only in another life. John meant that no one has seen GOD because GOD can't be seen. GOD doesn't exist as people imagine. GOD does exist but in another way. John adds, "*If we keep Jesus' commandments to love one another as GOD loved us, GOD exists in us*".⁷

Jesus often speaks about, '*GOD's work*' (v.10). He learned Joseph's trade. The gospel doesn't exactly say that Joseph was a carpenter. The Greek is, '*tecnos*' which means, *a maker, or fabricator, or a worker in general*. At that time there was no specialisation of labour. The work of Jesus' Father was, '*the tecnos of the universe*'. Those who live in Jesus' Way are carrying forward the Creator-GOD's own work. GOD created the universe through love. GOD's love is the force that unites atoms, molecules, cells, animals, people and societies. GOD has never stopped working because the universe has always gone on creating itself through this force. With Jesus the work is different and we are now coming to a conscious stage of evolution that is directed by people. Jesus was leaving the world because the work on Earth could continue. He taught that he is the poor. Anyone who sees the poor sees GOD.⁸

Wherever people work for humanity; for a more just society; for liberation from all forms of oppression; its there that the work of GOD is being done and creation is continuing. When the Israelite Scriptures talk about, '*the glory of GOD*' it means the fulfillment of justice on Earth. When the Israelites were freed from Egypt they were shown, '*the glory of GOD*' in a cloud.⁹ Each time there is a new liberation, it is a new showing of, '*the glory of GOD*'. That's '*the glory of GOD*' Jesus says he will reveal when we ask, '*in His name*' (v.13). He says, previously GOD acted in him but now, GOD acts in disciples, who will be enabled to do greater things than he could; and that's continuing GOD's work.

⁷ Jn.14:15ff

⁸ See Mt.5:3 & 25:31-46 & Lk.12:32

⁹ Cf. Ex.24:16

for sharing:¹⁰

- *'The seven' disciples don't limit their serving to distributing food. Rather, transmitting 'the good news' is of the essence of a disciples' work. Comment on Acts 6 : 1 – 6ff.*
- *In churches that have an ordained priesthood, there is a danger of minimalising the importance of the priesthood of all believers. Comment on 1 Peter 2 : 9.*
- *Jesus invited his followers to do even greater works than he himself did. Jesus released new life which: overcame death; made the truth known; and promised the holy Spirit. Comment on John 14 : 12.*

prayer:¹¹

*We have beheld Your glory, O GOD,
in the face of Christ Jesus, Your Son.
Enliven our faith, that through Christ
we may put our trust in You.
Deepen our faith, that in Christ we may serve You.
Complete our faith, that one day we may live with You
in that place which Christ prepares for us,
where he lives with You now and always
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

review:¹²

The disciples publicly put their weight behind (lay hands on) seven people who will stand-in for them in the distributing of food. Even as they do so, they are

- 10 Lectio Divina: reading GOD'S WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD'S presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*
- 11 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.
- 12 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

widening the work of the reigning of GOD. We, too, are 'pressed' to extend the work of Jesus. Jesus released new life which: overcame death; made the truth known; and promised the Spirit. Jesus promises faithful disciples will even outdo his own achievements. This means doing battle with our reigning ideologies; challenging the neglect of human welfare; encouraging budding forms of life in emerging and neglected groups of people; and showing how the liberated life prevails over the destructive forces of no-life. That is no mean agenda for a people who live trustfully.

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