

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER C (2019)

FAREWELL DISCOURSES IN THE NT (AA7 & JN17)

Introduction

So often in literary experience one finds a person's life summed up in farewell discourses. 'Famous Last Words' are often a treasure. They touch us by their sincerity. People about to die are less likely to tell lies for there is no longer any reason to impress. In Greek history the death of Socrates (399 BC) as presented by Plato is one of the most outstanding examples. We ourselves are accustomed to many of the English Martyrs making final declarations, none more evocative than St. Thomas More- made universally familiar in the play by J. Osborne *A Man for all Seasons*. In diverse contexts we have recorded for us the utterances of people condemned to death for atrocities, as with those Nazis in Nuremberg who had committed unspeakable crimes, rarely admitting them, never asking for forgiveness, sometimes justifying their perverse nationalism.

The New Testament

In our readings at today's Mass we have two examples of farewell discourses. The prayer for unity in John 17 reflects not just a desire for future harmony among the disciples of Jesus, but it probably reflects a state of disharmony already among them. The Epistles of John definitely attest such a disunity. John's Gospel was written long after the life, death and resurrection, of Jesus. It gives us a picture of the experience of those responsible for its witness. The addressees of John were probably a mix of mainly convert Jews and convert Gentiles. They were living in a world in some ways much like our own. Many were probably very simple people who professed and lived their faith in small communities. If they were Jews they would have risked being expelled from their local synagogues because they related to Jesus as to God. The account of the cure of the man born blind is evidence of that (Jn 9: 22). Such expulsion would have cost them something like what we would experience today if we had no social services. The synagogue was a place where care was taken of the poor, the widows and orphans. We can think of immigrants among others today- if they are not legal there is little protection available for them. To profess belief in Jesus in the first century context, as messiah and as God's only Son, redeemer and Saviour, was to risk being ostracized and deprived – the Gentile world would have had little sympathy for the ousted Jews even if they were Christian. Meanwhile the Gentile converts in the first century were bringing their own religious and intellectual experience to bear on their faith in those new mixed communities where living together in harmony could not have been easy.

St. Stephen

The case of Stephen provides a good example of what early converts endured. The farewell discourse of Stephen in today's first reading, like that of Jesus in John 17, was delivered before his imminent death. Stephen came from a Jewish-Greek background. He was Christianity's first martyr. The first martyr was not one of the apostles who was living in Jerusalem at the same time. They were still going to the Temple and probably to a synagogue there, where the language was Aramaic. Stephen belonged to the Greek speaking synagogue, and it was from there that he was dragged out to be stoned, probably lynched since there was no evidence of a formal trial. He is consciously presenting himself as a true disciple of Jesus, in his life and in his death, and not least in his attitude of

forgiveness. Paul as a willing witness of this still had a long road to travel before he would be converted, setting up churches and labouring at great cost to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). John's presentation of the farewell of Jesus is given as a prayer, as is that of Stephen, as will be that of Paul also. Paul's own famous farewell discourse is to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:17ff.), reminding them of how he had laboured among them, and that from among their own members ravishing wolves would wreak havoc on the faithful. He told them that they would never see his face again. He was on his way to Jerusalem and would be arrested there. They threw their arms around him and wept, and escorted him to the waiting ship.

The Mysterious Nature Unity

Our reading from The Apocalypse today (22: 12ff.) is also a prayer written in the time of persecution. It calls on Jesus to come and bring home to the Father those suffering faithful paying very dearly for their discipleship. Keeping fidelity against all the pressures to give up is the exhortation direct and indirect in our farewell readings. What might strike us forcibly is the lack of stress on the institutional aspects of Christianity in these exhortations. While authority is taken for granted it is still not defined, and still developing. Institutional structures are necessary for maintaining unity, but while necessary they are not sufficient. We have enough experience of history to know that. The mysterious element in faithful community commitment evokes continuous wonder. It surely is so profoundly mysterious that all of us, coming from very diverse backgrounds, can live together with respect – praying together, encouraging each other, hoping for the same ideals and the continuity in values that stand the test of time. The efforts made by each individual and by each community contribute all the time to making visible what faith in Jesus is, and what He meant by love. Stephen, John and Paul spell out in detail what it entails. We all have our own story to tell and it is part of the overall Christian history sad and glad.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with the well known Cardinal Newman prayer- so apposite today:
 May He support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give us a safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last. Amen.

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