

The Fifth Sunday after Easter

James 1:22ff

John 16:23-33

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If you were to enter the study of fifty clergy and perused their libraries, you would find a wide-ranging set of tomes. If Anglican surely there are prayer books galore and English church history, and spirituality. But, you would also discover scriptural commentaries on both the OT and NT. What would likely stand out is the volumes on the Gospel of John would outnumber all the other Gospels combined. It is perhaps because John is much beloved and spiritually takes us to places we do not experience in the Synoptics. It is the Easter Gospel. It has a beauty all its own and we recall passages that comfort; “God so loved the world”... and other well remembered sayings. But, it may also be that pastors and priests feel the need, as likely you do, for help in unwrapping the constant twists and turns, mysterious images, and striking language that also overrun the pages of this book. Consider just this day the complexities in a few verses: grief and joy, suffering and peace, seeing and not seeing, hidden and open speech; the list is expansive. Add to that the rather outlandish claim that if we ask anything of the Father in Jesus’ name it will be given. It is almost as if John is trying to boggle our intellect in order that we might for a moment listen differently, with the ear of our souls!

This reading is meant to be an insiders’ glimpse into the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, which includes us. It is as if a hidden microphone has been set in place and brings us to a private time and conversation. Like all deeply personal interactions this occurs within a context. This is a flashback, and occurs within the full bloom of Easter. You know how this works. It is a technique used in TV and movies all the time, but we have them as well. Have you ever had an experience; an event; a moment in your life that though long past still echoes in your mind, soul, and heart and carries real power even NOW? Perhaps it is a smell or taste or song which transports you to a crucial life passage and a momentary return to these still impact us in the present and even help make sense of why we think or act as we do. We gain an insight into NOW because of what happened THEN, or is promised.

The chief figure in Anne Tyler’s novel, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, is Pearl Hull, who is old, blind, and dying. Her son, Ezra, visits and reads to her each day from her diary. Most sections are ordinary, yet revealing. Just before her death he reads, “Early this morning I went out behind the house to weed. Was kneeling in the dirt by the stable and my pinafore a mess and perspiration running down my back...Reached for a trowel and all at once thought, Why I believe at just this moment I am absolutely happy...Piano scales were floating out of the window from the girl next door, and a fly buzzed in the grass, and I saw that I was kneeling on such a beautiful, green, little planet. I don’t care what else may come about, I have this moment and it belongs to me.” The entry ends and Pearl says, “Thank you, Ezra. There is no need to read anymore.” In looking back she had been transported to the core/center of her life. St. John brings us from the Resurrection reflexively back to the days beforehand in order to pull all of life’s concerns, questions, and struggles into the picture. He wants us to see and feel in the deepest places, that what we live with in this difficult world is measured in light of God’s greatest creation and ultimate victory. The Christian life is lived in the ebb and flow between these. We stand alongside the disciples (indeed all the saints before us) juggling the tensions we live with every day, and like them we wonder what to make of this life; what faith and prayer and the love of God have to do

with what ails us? (This homily occurred between a visit with my mother who is grappling with living alone, memory loss, and my own newly discovered cardiac concerns. “In this world you have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.” There is a set of opposites!)

Today on the calendar we have what has historically been known as Rogation Sun. Some call it a kind of Anglican ‘earth day’. The name derives from Latin, Rogare, meaning to ‘ask’. It goes back to at least 450 AD and originated in Britain. People would have their priest ‘beat the bounds’, i.e. bless the land, waterways, fields and woods; the places of living, hoping for a productive year, and recognizing that ‘this space’; this unique plot of life had a sacred meaning. It was not just geographical, but the place where they would live out their connection with creation and creator. More than anything else it was a day of praying; of asking to be blessed by God’s presence. “If you ask anything in my Name...”