

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More NYC
May 16, 2021 Streaming Mass
Easter 7th Sunday Year B John 17:11b-19

Very soon commencement speakers will be passing on words of wisdom to graduates as they go off to make their mark in the world. In today's Gospel, we see Jesus doing somewhat the same at the Last Supper for those disciples He has been teaching by word and by example for some time. We see Jesus sending His disciples out into the world, but still they are not to be part of the world. They are sent out into "the world"—the world that is created good by God—the world that is a web of relationships; wherein nothing is mapped out in advance; wherein people will discover of what sort of stuff, what kind of character they are made; wherein the contribution of each will make a difference for better or for worse. But there is another sense in which Jesus speaks of the "world," and that is the world—society--as we find it constructed by human beings—a world where too often we discover that domination, exploitation, and manipulation are the rule of the day.

Jesus sends His disciples into this world, but they are not to be of this world. They are not to make their own all those aspects of society that are corrupt, that are still in need of healing, of redemption, of reform. They are not to embrace the cult of success that counts the accumulation of money and power as the hallmark of genuine achievement. They are not to adopt the notion that self-interest and rugged-individualism should be the watchword of the day. Today we might say that they/we should not buy into a culture that prizes ambition, and sensationalism, and vulgarity, and doing whatever it takes to win. It is in that tension between being in the world, and yet not of the world, not a part of society's machinations, that we all have to work out our salvation.

That tension is not resolved by retreating from the world—by simply cursing its existence, by merely shouting, "politics is dirty," "business is just a rat race," or "everyone is out for himself!" Nor is it resolved by embracing some pseudo-Christian brand of Stoic passivity, wherein one permits oneself to be a doormat for those who want to take advantage. Still, we should expect that at times there will be some hard choices about doing what is the specifically Christian thing. What matters most is that we know what are those values that direct our lives; that we strengthen them by all those small, seemingly unimportant decisions we make in the course of a day. Then, in the critical moments, when we have to make the hard choices, we will be guided by the quiet inner voice of principle, rather than the shouts of expediency.

The word of God spoken in Jesus of Nazareth announces love as that basic value. And that love is not something mushy and sentimental; it is more than just a warm glow or a nice feeling. It is love refracted through the prism of honesty, truthfulness, and integrity. It is manifested in all the cold, hard decisions to do unto others, as I would like to be done unto. It is the determination to treat people decently; to be true to one's word. It is to give a full day's work for a just salary; it is to pay one's employees a decent salary; in making contracts, it is to say "yes" when I mean yes, and "no" what I mean no.

Society sometimes finds such people hard to deal with. They don't always fit in. So, in matters of business, it is not always the man or woman who is most genuine and honest who is rewarded, but he or she who is most useful, or in today's parlance—"transactional"—the one always ready to "seal the deal." The person who can subjugate his or her values to those of the corporation—the person who can deny himself, his beliefs, his feelings, his judgments for the sake of the company. That is the one who receives the reward. And the reward may be significant—a partnership, a fatter paycheck, a higher rating from the personnel chief, the prestige of some choice appointment, the corner office. Even more seductively, the reward bestowed may be a "corporate identity," a sense of purpose, the very meaning and significance of what one's life is all about, but an identity at odds with the one given us in baptism, and reaffirmed every Easter Sunday, as a child of God and disciple of Jesus Christ

What is the price that is paid in the coin of personal integrity? And, even before I get "there," what kind of person am I already in the process of becoming? Can I expect to swim in a sea of barracuda and sharks and remain unaffected? How do I keep myself from mindlessly adapting to the environment in which I spend so much of my time? Jesus said to his disciples before sending them out into the world, "Be as clever as serpents, and as innocent as doves." In other words, His was no endorsement of naïveté. His disciples should understand completely what they were up against, but they should not become like the rest of what's out there. They should know the score, but not make up their own rules as they go along. Don't be a sap, but don't be a shark either?

There are no easy answers, but both for a life lived in love, justice and integrity, and for a life lived in the pursuit simply of material success—for both there is a price to be paid. Even the latter, with all its allure, may be disappointing. For, in the words of the poet Gertrude Stein, "When you get there, you may realize there's no there, there." A person may come to lack for nothing, except the very meaning that makes life worth living.

As we gather to celebrate this Eucharist let us pray that we can keep our heads screwed on straight, even when all those around us seem to be losing theirs, and that we can continue to recognize the boundary between fairness and compassion and opportunism and exploitation.