

This Sunday's Readings – the 5th Sunday of Easter – Today is Passover and it seems fitting that the Gospel reading is from the first discourse at the Last Supper. What links all three readings today is a lesson in building. In the Acts of the Apostles the foundation for the Church is laid. In the 1st Letter of St. Peter, the cornerstone (Jesus) is put in position and the building begins using “living stones”. We are the living stones. In the Gospel reading, Jesus prepares dwelling places for us in His Father's house. Up until now, all the readings from Acts have depicted the early Church as one without problems. That's about to change.

In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we see an all too common problem, not enough people to help in the parish. The Hellenists (Greek speaking Palestinian Jews) complained that their widows were being short changed in favor of the Hebrews (Aramaic or Hebrew speaking Palestinian Jews) “in the daily distribution”. The Apostles solved this problem by designating authority to a new group, the deacons. The word deacon means to “serve at table” and that is how they are referenced in this passage. Here we first learn of Stephen, who would later become the first martyr. Note that after the seven were chosen, they were presented to the Apostles “who prayed and laid hands on them”. The laying on of hands is representative of ordination just as it is today for priests and deacons. The foundation of the early Church is taking shape. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* discusses some of the problems that are brought to the fore in the reading – “The main one is that although we are told that the seven men were appointed to “serve tables” in order to allow the apostles to give their undivided attention to the ministry of the word, nevertheless the only members of the seven whom we hear about after their appointment turn out to be themselves notable ministers of the word, namely, Stephen and Philip. Probably this confusion is due to the author of Luke-Acts, who sees in the appointment of the seven the institution of a subordinate ministry (deacons?—he uses the verb *diakonein*, meaning “serve” but does not actually call them deacons). In actual fact, however, the seven must have been more than that. They must have been, in a real sense, leaders of the growing Greek-speaking part of the community. In that case, the real concern of the apostles in recognizing the seven would have been to prevent a split between the Greek-speaking and the Aramaic-speaking Christians (Hellenists and Hebrews). Perhaps even the act of ordination—laying on of hands with prayer—reflects the practice at the time Luke wrote rather than that of the earliest Church (see also Acts [13:3](#) and [14:23](#), which are probably equally anachronistic). Nevertheless, ordination by the laying on of hands with prayer must have been introduced in a Palestinian-Jewish environment, for it reflects the synagogue practice of ordaining elders—a fact that has even led some modern scholars to suppose that the seven were appointed presbyters (elders) rather than deacons. But this is improbable. The truth more likely is that we have here two levels of interpretation:

- (1) the original historical situation, that is, the tensions mentioned above and the recognition of the leaders of the Greek-speaking group by the Twelve, thus averting a breach between the two parties;
- (2) the origins of a subordinate ministry”.

In the 1st Letter of St. Peter, the cornerstone is laid. As we all know, Jesus is the cornerstone. The building process continues with us as the “living stones”.

Today’s Gospel reading from John is the beginning of the first Last Supper discourse. Jesus tries to reassure His disciples that all will be well and “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. He also tells His disciples that He is going to prepare a dwelling place for them in His Father’s house. The disciples do not understand what is about to transpire. Thomas asks Jesus where this place is and to show him the way. Jesus answers – “I AM the way and the truth and the life”. Remember that in John’s Gospel, Jesus uses the term “I AM” which in Hebrew is the name of God, and which is unspeakable by any mortal. In short, Jesus answers by saying “I AM God”. Jesus is the way to eternal life. Philip then asks Jesus to show them the Father. Again, they do not understand. Jesus answers – “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”. Again, Jesus is saying that He and the Father are one. Another term that is unique to John is “Amen, amen, I say to you”. Whenever Jesus is about to proclaim something very profound, He begins with that term. In today’s last verse, He says “Amen, amen, I say to you ... I am going to the Father”. The Ascension and Pentecost are drawing closer.

Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column summarizes all three of today’s readings for us today – “Like all reformers, the bishops at Vatican II tried to mesh Church practice with our earliest faith traditions. During their deliberations, Scripture stopped being just a collection of proof-texts defending the Church’s behavior and became, as the biblical authors intended, an ideal against which Church behavior and structure should be measured. These readings are a clear sign that the reform which began at Vatican II must be ongoing. If reality doesn’t correspond to the words we say and hear, then we shouldn’t be surprised if some of the faithful find themselves in danger of losing their cool”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Scholars identify chapters 14-17 of John’s Gospel as the evangelist’s creative presentation of teachings of Jesus in the form of a “farewell address.” In general, these passages begin with an indication that the speaker is about to die or depart. Then follows an exhortation to his successors. The elements in this part of the address vary: there are prophecies, words of caution about the future, God’s intentions for the future. Successors are also exhorted to pass these words on to others. Sometimes there is also notice of the speaker’s death and burial. When John 14 concludes with “Rise, let us be on our way,” we are surprised to see that John 15 continues the farewell address. Clearly the evangelist has strung together otherwise separate traditions.

JESUS THE WAY

Jesus’ words and deeds in this Gospel speak love at every turn. He demonstrates absolute, total, and universal love in his varied responses to those who approach him. Jesus’ life, teaching, and behavior do indeed present people with “an authentic vision of human existence,” that is, a model of the way human life ought to be lived. If one lives like this, one will definitely encounter God, who is Love. These are heartening words not only to

Jesus' disciples but especially to believers within John's community who are beginning to suffer for believing in Jesus. "The Judeans had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22; see also 12:42; 16:2). Such excommunication deprived these people of a community and a place that were dear to them. Moreover it raised doubts about whether they really could meet God anywhere else. The synagogue, after all, represented God's chosen community. Jesus assures his disciples and through them all subsequent generations of believers: "If you know me, you will know my Father also." If one has met Jesus, one has met the Father. Philip still doesn't get it. He asks Jesus to "show us the Father" (v. 8). This must have been particularly disappointing to the historical, earthly Jesus. Jesus himself called Philip to be a follower, and he in turn brought Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:43-48). When faced with a hungry multitude, Jesus turned to Philip and asked him how they could be fed (John 6:5-9). When curious Greeks wanted to meet and talk with Jesus, they approached Philip to intercede on their behalf (John 12:20-22). Only against this background can one appreciate Jesus' disappointment: "You still do not know me!?" Philip's failure provides Jesus with the opportunity to point to the future successes of his followers: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these . . ." (v. 12). The works of Jesus are the works of God: to give life, and to restore meaning to life or enrich life's meaning. Already at creation God called us to take dominion over evolution ("to till the garden and keep it," Gen 1:26-28). This is our challenge to engage in life-giving activities rather than death-dealing ones. This is also our challenge to put meaning into life rather than suck it out. This is what Jesus in his "last will and testament" urges his followers to do out of love for others. Jesus has presented himself as the authentic vision of existence. Believers can only echo Peter: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68)".

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team