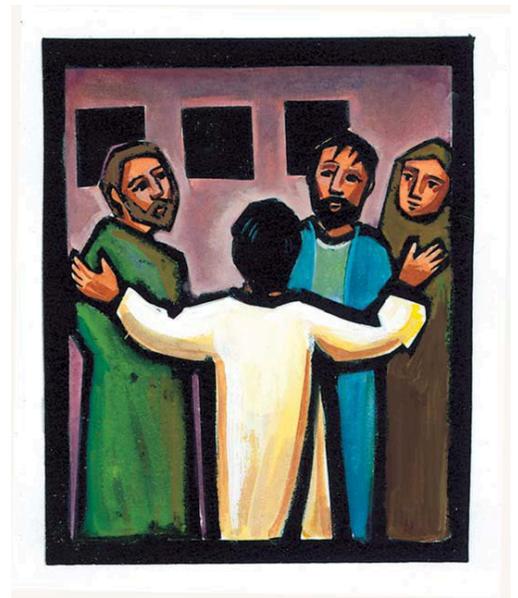


**MAY 10, 2020**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER A**

**FIRST READING**

This Sunday's reading from the Acts of the Apostles twice tells us that the number of disciples continued to increase. That increase created the need to appoint new ministers, or deacons. Luke says the Greek-speaking Christians complained that their poor were not being treated as well as those who spoke Aramaic. In response, the Twelve convened a formal assembly and announced that because their first responsibility was to preach, others should serve at the table of the Lord. Among those who were appointed were Stephen, who would become the first martyr, and a Greek-speaking man named Nicholas, who would have been a convert to Judaism before he joined the young Christian community. The task of the seven newly named ministers was to preside at the table and to assure that all the poor received what they needed.



**A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (6:1–7)**

As the number of disciples continued to grow,  
the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews  
because their widows  
were being neglected in the daily distribution.  
So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said,  
“It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table.  
Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men,  
filled with the Spirit and wisdom,  
whom we shall appoint to this task,  
whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer  
and to the ministry of the word.”  
The proposal was acceptable to the whole community,  
so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit,  
also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas,  
and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism.  
They presented these men to the apostles  
who prayed and laid hands on them.  
The word of God continued to spread,  
and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly;  
even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

\* [6:1–7] The Hellenists...the Hebrews: the Hellenists were not necessarily Jews from the diaspora, but were more probably Palestinian Jews who spoke only Greek. The Hebrews were Palestinian Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and who may also have spoken Greek. Both groups belong to the Jerusalem Jewish Christian community. The conflict between them leads to a restructuring of the community that

will better serve the community's needs. The real purpose of the whole episode, however, is to introduce Stephen as a prominent figure in the community whose long speech and martyrdom will be recounted in Acts 7.

\* [6:2–4] The essential function of the Twelve is the “service of the word,” including development of the kerygma by formulation of the teachings of Jesus.

\* [6:2] To serve at table: some commentators think that it is not the serving of food that is described here but rather the keeping of the accounts that recorded the distribution of food to the needy members of the community. In any case, after Stephen and the others are chosen, they are never presented carrying out the task for which they were appointed (Acts 6:2–3). Rather, two of their number, Stephen and Philip, are presented as preachers of the Christian message. They, the Hellenist counterpart of the Twelve, are active in the ministry of the word.

\* [6:6] They...laid hands on them: the customary Jewish way of designating persons for a task and invoking upon them the divine blessing and power to perform it.

The Australian biblical scholar John N. Collins published a very plausible interpretation of this passage in a popularized version, *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Liturgical Press, 1992). Based on his research into relevant biblical passages including this one, his answer is a resounding "No!" The cultural context for today's reading is that the people in general spoke Greek, the apostles spoke Aramaic. Greek speaking male believers (Hellenists) complained that their widows were being excluded from the "daily ministry" (preferable to "daily distribution") by this language disparity. Greek speaking widows could not understand the Aramaic instruction given by the apostles.

In response, the Twelve are not complaining that they are being asked to set aside preaching in order to engage in menial work, "To serve at table" (NAB; NRSV) or feed the widows and thereby to "neglect the word of God:" Collins proposes as a more plausible translation: "It is not right that we [Twelve] should leave aside the public proclamation of the word [in the Temple] to carry out our ministry during mealtimes of the widows:'

Recall that this world is rigidly gender divided. Even families do not eat together at one table. Men eat with the boys older than puberty, and women eat separately with the girls and all the boys younger than the age of puberty. Thus the idea is not serving meals but rather carrying out this preaching activity in the vicinity of tables, i.e., at home, in private space, at gatherings of widows at tables not to eat but to learn, rather than in the public forum where Mediterranean males typically gather and discuss various topics.

The apostles come up with a solution that pleased and was accepted by the entire community. The community was to select from its midst (1) men [this is the exclusive Greek word that does not include women] of good repute (2) full of the Spirit (3) and of wisdom. In a word, the community should select men who were capable of preaching. Still, it is important to note that while the community selects them, the apostles appoint or formally commission them. Deputizing these men for the task of preaching allows the Twelve to continue to perform long prayers of praise and ministry of the Word in the Temple. Moreover, these "deacons" did not have to be with the Lord from his baptism (see Acts 1:21-22). Thus, from the very beginning, the Church controlled the supply of the ministers proposed to them by the community.

Two things stand out in this passage. According to Luke, ministry involves proclaiming the Word to unbelievers (in the Temple) and nurturing the Word among believers ("at table"). Ministry, thus, is inextricably linked with purveying the Word of God, and those who do it are selected by the community and inducted into their duties by authorities in the Church.

## RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 33:1–2, 4–5, 18–19)

This hymn is addressed to the faithful, reminding them of the many reasons they have to praise God. Their God is absolutely trustworthy; the signs of God's kindness are everywhere to be seen. Most of all, God never stops watching over them and caring for them.

℟. (22) Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.  
Exult, you just, in the LORD;  
praise from the upright is fitting.  
Give thanks to the LORD on the harp;  
with the ten-stringed lyre chant his praises.  
Upright is the word of the LORD,  
and all his works are trustworthy.  
He loves justice and right;  
of the kindness of the LORD the earth is full.  
See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him,  
upon those who hope for his kindness,  
To deliver them from death  
and preserve them in spite of famine.

\* [Psalm 33] A hymn in which the just are invited (Ps 33:1–3) to praise God, who by a mere word (Ps 33:4–5) created the three-tiered universe of the heavens, the cosmic waters, and the earth (Ps 33:6–9). Human words, in contrast, effect nothing (Ps 33:10–11). The greatness of human beings consists in God's choosing them as a special people and their faithful response (Ps 33:12–22).

Previously used on the Second Sunday of Lent (see above) this psalm of praise celebrates the creative power of the Word (v. 4) which is an idea that was common in the sacred writings of Egypt and Babylon as it was in ancient Israel. Indeed, "word" and "works" stand in parallelism in verse 4 the divine Word is personal, effective, dependable. Further, God watches ("eye of the Lord." v. 18) over those who fear him to come to their rescue as they have need of it. The concluding verses pray that God remain faithful in extending steadfast lovingkindness (Hebrew: *hesed* translated by the Greek word for "mercy" as reflected in the refrain).

These verses are indeed an appropriate response to the first reading which focuses on preaching the Word of God. In addition, it bridges well to the gospel John 14:1-12) in which Jesus clarifies his words about God's words and works in response to specific questions from Thomas and especially Philip.....

## SECOND READING

Peter addresses this letter to people he describes as sojourners: Gentile Christians who already know persecution. Peter encourages them to keep turning to the Lord, and even more than that, to imitate him. Although they are Gentiles, Peter's message is so full of Hebrew images that he seems to be passing the vocation of Israel on

to the Christian community. Peter's four descriptions of the diverse community insist on one central reality: they are called not as individuals but as a people. They are a priesthood, a people of God whose vocation is to spread the Word of God. Like their Master, they will be rejected, but built on him they will also be a spiritual house, a dwelling place of God forever.

### **A reading from the first Letter of Saint Peter (2:4–9)**

Beloved:

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings  
but chosen and precious in the sight of God,  
and, 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.

For it says in Scripture:

Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion,  
a cornerstone, chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.

Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith:

The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone, and

A stone that will make people stumble,  
and a rock that will make them fall.

They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.

You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood,  
a holy nation, a people of his own,  
so that you may announce the praises” of him  
who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

\* [\[2:4–8\]](#) Christ is the cornerstone (cf. [Is 28:16](#)) that is the foundation of the spiritual edifice of the Christian community ([1 Pt 2:5](#)). To unbelievers, Christ is an obstacle and a stumbling block on which they are destined to fall ([1 Pt 2:8](#)); cf. [Rom 11:11](#).

\* [\[2:5\]](#) Let yourselves be built: the form of the Greek word could also be indicative passive, “you are being built” (cf. [2 Pt 2:9](#)).

\* [\[2:9–10\]](#) The prerogatives of ancient Israel mentioned here are now more fully and fittingly applied to the Christian people: “a chosen race” (cf. [Is 43:20–21](#)) indicates their divine election ([Eph 1:4–6](#)); “a royal priesthood” (cf. [Ex 19:6](#)) to serve and worship God in Christ, thus continuing the priestly functions of his life, passion, and resurrection; “a holy nation” ([Ex 19:6](#)) reserved for God, a people he claims for his own (cf. [Mal 3:17](#)) in virtue of their baptism into his death and resurrection. This transcends all natural and national divisions and unites the people into one community to glorify the one who led them from the darkness of paganism to the light of faith in Christ. From being “no people” deprived of all mercy, they have become the very people of God, the chosen recipients of his mercy (cf. [Hos 1:9](#); [2:23](#)).

This is a marvelous yet complex passage emphasizing the ancient covenant theme of divine election (VY. 4, 5, 6, 9). It begins (VY. 4-5) by announcing, combining, and applying both to Jesus and the believers the

sacred titles that follow (VY. 4- 5a refer to VY. 6-8, and the rest of 5 refers to VY. 9-10). Verses 6-8 draw on one set of traditions (Isa 28:16; Ps 118:22; Isa 8:14) that concern a "stone" which both in Israelite and Messianist traditions was considered an image of the Messiah (Mark 12:1-12 and parallels; Acts 4:8-12; Rom 9:30-33). Verses 9-10 draw on another set of traditions (Exod 19:6; Isa 43:20-21; 42:6-9; 63:7-9; Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1-12) that describe God's elect community and family but are now applied to the new people of God.

Faith in the Messiah, a living stone, makes believers living stones which God builds into a household of the Spirit, a holy priestly community. The elected people of the covenant who once formed the dwelling place of God now constitute the family in whom God's Spirit resides. As a consequence, these people of God can offer acceptable sacrifices motivated by the Spirit.

In his historical setting, Martin Luther interpreted this text as the biblical basis for a concept of the general priesthood of all believers. His point was that baptism makes priests and kings of all the faithful and that ministry is every believer's divine calling. His interpretation was a response to the situation of the church of his day and his aim of ecclesial reform. In its own first-century literary and historical setting, these verses carry a different meaning. Election of Jesus and the community is stressed much more than priesthood. In fact, the priesthood theme is mentioned nowhere in the rest of the letter, while covenant remains the dominant theme. Further, these verses carry an unmistakable collectivist stamp (dwelling place, household, priestly community, nation, people) true to the collectivistic understanding of personality that prevailed in Asia Minor. The passage does not affirm the equality of all believers as individual priests or kings. Hence the emphasis is on the community and the divine favor accorded to the new covenant people of God.

In today's gospel (John 14:1-12), Jesus focuses the disciples' attention on the Father and the Father's dwelling. Jesus concludes by promising that the one who believes in him will do the works he does and even greater works. The sacred authors of 1 Peter add further insight to how believers can do the works of Jesus and even greater. What does it mean in the twenty-first century to "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"?

## **ALLELUIA (Jn 14:6)**

**℟. ALLELUIA**

I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord; no one comes to the Father, except through me.

## **GOSPEL**

In this selection from Jesus' last discourse, two disciples ask questions to which they should already know the answers. As a matter of fact, the two questions are simply variations on the same theme. Thomas asks about "the way" (v. 5), and then Philip says, "Master, show us the Father" (John 14:8). Both requests indicate that the disciples do not understand that Jesus is the Way. They do not grasp the fact that to see him is to see the Father.

In typical fashion, John uses uncomprehending characters to allow Jesus to explain something far deeper than they imagined. In the first section of the reading, Jesus explains his departure and the fact that he will return for his own. Then, he reminds them that they know the way to the life he is promising. Thomas disagrees, seemingly asking for a road map for Jesus' upcoming journey. To that, Jesus responds: "I am the way and the truth and the life."

The image of "the way" has a rich scriptural history. The word occurs over 150 times in the psalms, beginning with Psalm 1, which says, "happy those who do not ... go the way of sinners" (v. 1) and "the

Lord watches over the way of the just, / but the way of the wicked leads to ruin" (v. 6). Jesus' way is the way of the just, a way of life that the disciples are to imitate.

While imitation characterizes the ordinary relationship between a disciple and a teacher, Jesus' statement has additional implications. In John 8:31-32, Jesus invited his disciples to remain in his word so that they would know the truth that would set them free. As he stood before Pilate, Jesus said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (18:37). The truth of which Jesus speaks comes from taking him in, listening, and being freed by him.

The prologue to John (1 :1-14), describes Jesus as the source of life. In chapter 6, Jesus says "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and later on he identifies himself as "the resurrection and the life" (John 11 :25). The life he offers is nourishment for the present and an everlasting future.

Jesus' statement "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) is a summary of who he is for his disciples: the ones who heard the words and all those who would come after. Jesus is the "way" not simply as an example, but much more because he dwells in the disciples as source of life and truth. Later, in 15:1-10, he will describe that indwelling as akin to a vine and its branches. To accept Jesus as our way, truth, and life means to open ourselves to his dwelling in us. It is a communion that could hardly be more intimate.

#### **+ A reading from the holy GOSPEL according to John (14:1–12)**

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled.

You have faith in God; have faith also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

If there were not,

would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come back again and take you to myself,

so that where I am you also may be.

Where I am going you know the way."

Thomas said to him,

"Master, we do not know where you are going;

how can we know the way?"

Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.

If you know me, then you will also know my Father.

From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him,

"Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us."

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time

and you still do not know me, Philip?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own.

The Father who dwells in me is doing his works.

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me,

or else, believe because of the works themselves.  
Amen, amen, I say to you,  
whoever believes in me will do the works that I do,  
and will do greater ones than these,  
because I am going to the Father.”

- \* [\[14:1–31\]](#) Jesus’ departure and return. This section is a dialogue marked off by a literary inclusion in [Jn 14:1, 27](#): “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”
- \* [\[14:1\]](#) You have faith: could also be imperative: “Have faith.”
- \* [\[14:3\]](#) Come back again: a rare Johannine reference to the parousia; cf. [1 Jn 2:28](#).
- \* [\[14:4\]](#) The way: here, of Jesus himself; also a designation of Christianity in [Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22](#).
- \* [\[14:6\]](#) The truth: in John, the divinely revealed reality of the Father manifested in the person and works of Jesus. The possession of truth confers knowledge and liberation from sin ([Jn 8:32](#)).
- \* [\[14:7\]](#) An alternative reading, “If you knew me, then you would have known my Father also,” would be a rebuke, as in [Jn 8:19](#).
- \* [\[14:8\]](#) Show us the Father: Philip is pictured asking for a theophany like [Ex 24:9–10; 33:18](#).

#### **FAREWELL ADDRESSES**

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:"

The Bible reports farewell addresses from Jacob (Gen 49), Moses (Deut 31-33), Paul (Acts 20), and Jesus (Luke 22; John 14-17), among others.

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. What final advice does Jesus give in this part of his farewell address? It can be summarized in John Dominic Crossan's translation of verse 6: "I am the authentic (truth) vision (way) of existence (life):" Jesus announces his imminent departure and return to take his disciples with him to a place of permanent fellowship with God. And he reminds them: "You know the way to the place where I am going:"

Thomas, true to form, claims he doesn't know the way! It is in response to this that Jesus points to himself as the way, the only way in which human beings can meet God.

#### **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).

#### **CONNECTIONS TO CHURCH TEACHING AND TRADITION**

■ "Faith ... means abiding with [Jesus] in the Father who, in him, so loves us that he abides with us" (CCC, 2614).

■ "[I]n every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him (see Acts 10:35). He has, however, willed to make women and men holy ... to make them into a people who might acknowledge and serve him in holiness" (LG, 9).

■ "The first and last point of reference of this catechesis will always be Jesus Christ himself, who is 'the way, and the truth, and the life'1" (CCC, 1698).

■ "[Christ] tells us who man truly is .... He shows us the way, and this way is the truth. He himself is both the way and the truth, and therefore he is also the life which all of us are seeking. He also shows us the way beyond death; only someone able to do this is a true teacher of life" (SS, 6).