

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96 (95); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; John 17:11, 17-23

I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony

John 17:11 [Jesus said:] And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

John 17:17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

John 17:20 I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

John 17 forms the climax of the “Farewell Discourse” in the Fourth Gospel. Given the depth of the writing, perhaps it is a surprise that the entire chapter is read only on the seventh Sunday of Easter, as follows: Year A: 17:1-11; Year B: 11b-19; Year C: 20-26. The introductory material here covers all of John 17, as a foundation for the commentary.

KIND OF WRITING

The literary setting is the Farewell Discourse, itself a familiar *genre* from the Old Testament, Jewish writings at the time and from the New Testament itself. The community setting is implied by the literary *genre*: how will the believers sus-

tain their life and faith after the departure of Jesus? In the course of it, the Johannine Jesus speaks of himself in the third person—a hint that we are hearing the catechetical voice of the community.

John 17 has the following layout:

- I. Jesus prays for his glorification and describes eternal life (1-5)
- II. The beginning of eternal life in the disciples (6-8)
- III. Jesus prays for his disciples (9-19)
- IV. Jesus prays for future believers (20-24)
- V. Jesus concludes his prayer (25-26)

Our excerpt takes us through most of parts II and III. All of John 17 should be read, to grasp the full power of the prayer.

The themes are: hour, glory, work, perfecting, love, fragility, disciples, union and communion, Jesus’ self-gift and the revelation of God. The only topic “missing” is the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, present very richly in the preceding discourses. The prayer is serene.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The rain and snow fall from the sky and do not return, but instead water the earth and make it produce and yield crops, and provide seed for the planter and food for those who must eat. (Isaiah 55:10)

I will praise your name continually, and will sing hymns of thanksgiving. My prayer was heard, for you saved me from destruction and rescued me in time of trouble. For this reason I thank you and praise you, and I bless the name of the Lord. (Sirach 51:11-12)

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up

Thought for the day

The community of faith — the church — does not exist of and for itself. We belong to the church because of God’s own mission to all of humanity. As we share this mission, we recognise that the project is not “ours” in a double sense. It is God’s project, first and foremost. Even more, the Spirit is already at work ahead of us in everything and everyone. Our missionary task is more nuanced: as we recognise the Spirit at work in our own lives, we hope to help others come to the same realisation and ownership, the same love and hope.

Prayer

God, Father, Son and Spirit: show us how to be bearers of your mission, your love, your Good News in our time. May we live wholeheartedly what we have received that others may be drawn to your embrace. Amen.

his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:24-27)

For his faithfulness and meekness he consecrated him, choosing him out of all humankind. (Sirach 45:4)

It is not with you alone that I am making this covenant by oath, but with whoever stands with us here today before the LORD our God as well as those not with us here today. (Deuteronomy 29:14-15)

Then you will know that the LORD of Heaven’s Armies has sent me. (Zechariah 2:9)

...and He prepared me *before the foundation of the world*, that I should be the mediator of His covenant. (*Assumption of Moses* 1:13-14, a non-canonical book).

This is our God; no other can be compared to him. He found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to his servant Jacob and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind. (Baruch 3:35-37)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are two kinds of New Testament background to bear in mind: the Synoptic and the Johannine.

The Synoptic tradition

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. *All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*” (Matt 11:25–27)

This passage is known in scholarship as the “Johannine bolt of lightning”. Below is the *Our Father* in Matthew’s version showing further striking overlaps with John 17. The Note in the Revised New Jerusalem Bible reads, “(t)he majestic final ch. of the discourses is almost a meditation on the Lord’s Prayer.”

Our *Father* (John 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24–25) in heaven (17:1), *hallowed* (17:17, 19) be your *name* (17:6, 11–12, 26). Your kingdom come. Your *will* (17:24) be done, on earth (17:4) as it is in heaven (17:1). *Give* (17:2, 4, 6–9, 11–12, 14, 22, 24) us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but *rescue* (cf. *protect*: 17:6, 11–12, 15; *guard*: 17:12) us from the *evil one* (17:15). (Matt 6:9–13)

The Johannine tradition

Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. (John 6:57)

For I have given you an example — you should do *just as* I have done for you. (John 13:15)

I give you a new commandment—to love one another. *Just as* I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (John 13:34; cf. John 15:9)

Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you. (John 20:21)

ST PAUL

A farewell discourse in the Acts

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem without knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit warns me in town after town that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not consider my life worth anything to my-

self, so that I may finish my task and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace. (Acts 20:22–24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The present tense is unexpected until we remember the risen Lord is speaking, looking backwards. Vv. 11–16 are a prayer of consecration, that “they may be holy.” “Holy father” echoes biblical tradition: Leviticus 11:44; Psalm 71:22; 111:9; Isaiah 6:3.

Verse 17 “In the truth” is not abstract veracity but the person of Jesus, who in this Gospel is himself the way, the truth and life (John 14:6). Truth here translates the biblical concept of faithfulness, that is, interpersonal truth. The “word” (*logos*) means words in the usual sense and also the Word made flesh, the person of Jesus. See: “...nor do you have his word residing in you, because you do not believe the one whom he sent.” (John 5:38)

Verse 18 The verb to send (*apostellō*) is used, from which our word apostle. The apparently insignificant word “as” carries an enormous freight in this Gospel. More fully translated as “just as,” it indicates that the mission of Jesus continues fully and completely in the mission of the disciples, an essential teaching for Mission Sunday. Cf. the citations above under Johannine tradition. This verse also anticipates the commission in John 20:21.

Verse 19 An echo of texts such as Deuteronomy 15:19 and perhaps Sirach 45:4 above. “For their sakes” (in Greek *huper autōn*) means for the benefit of or for the sake of, rather than in place of.

Verse 20 The Moses tradition is echoed here: see the important Deuteronomy 29:14–15 above. Such a prayer reflects the post-Easter spirituality of the community. The proclamation of Jesus himself anticipates the first conclusion of the Gospel in John 20:30–31.

Verse 21 Concern for unity and love among the surviving followers are standard topics for a farewell discourse but of special relevance here. The Johannine community was made up of followers of John the Baptist (ch. 2), Pharisees (ch. 3), Samaritans (ch. 4) and Gentiles (ch. 4). As well as being mixed, the community experienced some kind of schism, registered in John 6:66 and 1 John 2:19. The teaching on unity and love is needed because it is not being lived and not being practiced. Still, the goal of such communion is not inward looking, some

kind of holy huddle, but outward looking, so that the mission itself may be credible (cf. Zechariah 2:9 above).

Verse 22 Glory is a key term in this Gospel — for the identity of Jesus in God, for his destiny in being lifted up and for the core reality of the faith community. The Greek for glory (*doxa*), has the connotation of appearance, the way things seem from the outside. By the contrast, the Hebrew word (*kābōd*) points to inner substance, weight, reality. Having the “glory” that Jesus had means being in communion with the Father, sharing in the paschal mystery of Jesus, and being empowered by the Spirit. See the important gloss in chapter 7: *Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were going to receive, for the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* (John 7:39)

Verse 23 Just as God’s glory “tabernacled” among the people in Exodus 40:34, likewise the Word made flesh has tabernacled among us (John 1:14). The mutual indwelling (14:20; 17:26), takes this covenantal presence (*shekinah*) to a new level. Cf. Baruch 3:35–37 above. The adverb “perfectly” echoes two passages. *Having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end* (= completely, perfectly). (John 13:1) *Jesus said, “It is completed* (= perfected!)” (John 19:30)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus prays for his followers — of all generations including ourselves today. Do I feel his intercession for me and my own calling as a disciple and witness?
2. Within communities of any kind, division is simply normal: it’s just what happens. How do I myself work towards reconciliation and greater unity?
3. To be witnesses to the love of God means to live the love we have received ourselves, as a wordless — more effective? — living witness. Do I own that as a central part of my mission?

PRAYER

God our Father, glorify your Son in the lives of the people called by his name. Through no merit of ours, you have made us your own, to be your witnesses on earth. Keep us true to the name we bear, that people everywhere may know that you are the God and lover of us all. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope

1 Thess 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

1 Thess 1:2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of *faith* and labour of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the readings turn towards expectation of the end. Accordingly, we begin reading from 1 Thessalonians for the five Sundays. Especially on Sundays 32 and 33 the end of time will be in view. The whole letter is quite short this might be a chance to read it all through again.

KIND OF WRITING

	Letter	Speech
1:1	Greeting	
1:2-8 and 9-10	Thanksgiving	Introduction (Thesis)
2:1-3:13	Body of the Letter	Proof 1
4:1-12		Proof 2
4:13-5:11		Proof 3
5:12-27		Conclusion
5:28	Greeting	

Our reading, therefore, offers the letter introduction (v.1) and half of the thanksgiving/introduction (vv. 2-5). Vv. 6-10 will be heard next Sunday. The thanksgivings are in all Paul's letters (except Galatians) and they serve a double function. Firstly, they serve to "connect" Paul with those he is writing to. Here, combining their story with his prayer and affection. Secondly, they serve to anticipate topics which will arise in the body of the letter. Paul commences the rebuilding of relationships which will

take up all of chs. 2 and 3.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

With 1 Thessalonians, we encounter not only the earliest Christian document but also the third phase of Paul's career. For about forty years, he had lived and studied as a Pharisee (from about 6 BC until about AD 34-36). After his encounter with Christ, Paul had a ministry around Syria and Cilicia (from his encounter until about AD 48). Paul thus had about fifteen years experience as an evangeliser, even though from this period no letters survive. The final stage of his ministry is the Paul we know from the letters, the indefatigable traveller and tireless promotor of the Good News. This period, also about fifteen years in length, began in Europe with his preaching first in Philippi and later in Thessalonica. Thus, although 1 Thessalonians is indeed the first Christian document to come down to us, it is rich in teaching, rooted in Paul's experience of proclamation for about fifteen years, not to speak of his forty years as a faithful Pharisee.

It is known that Paul was in Corinth in the winter of 51 and spring of 52 AD. From there, he wrote his first letter to the (very few) Christ-believers in Thessalonica. Evidently, Paul preached there for some time (longer than intimated in the Acts) and then continued on his way to Athens. While in Athens, the Thessalonians sent word about some kind of persecution. They were indeed distressed and needed Paul to come to them again. However, he was unable to come himself and sent Timothy instead. Timothy found the believers distressed and upset at Paul's apparent lack of concern. Eventually, Timothy made his way back to Paul, by then in Corinth, and reported everything to Paul including some questions they felt themselves unable to answer. Paul's letter back is our 1 Thessalonians. In the nature of the case, the first part of the letter is devoted to a certain amount of fence-mending with the Thessalonians.

RELATED PASSAGES

But since we are of the day, we must stay sober by putting on the breastplate of *faith* and *love* and as a helmet our *hope* for salvation. For God did not destine us for wrath but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Thess 5:8-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The letter is *not* by Paul alone but by the group of the closest collaborators. The word "church" is really "assembly", a neutral word, which has to be qualified by "in God" to make it clear *which* assembly. The greeting is a traditional one from Jewish practice.

Verse 2 The believers in Thessalonica are part of Paul's relationship with God in prayer. Of course, it is very compelling that someone prays for you *always and constantly*.

Verse 3 Paul acknowledges the difficult experience of the Thessalonians—an essential step in restoring their bond. The Pauline triad—faith, love and hope—seems in the wrong order but it comes up again in 5:8-9. The order mirrors the sequence of the letter, in which Paul discusses how they came to *faith*, how to live *love* and to *hope* for. The other triad—work, labour and steadfastness—is also eloquent.

Verses 4-5a Paul affirms God's election of the Thessalonians and he proves it with the evidence of the charismatic gifts—always important—and the sheer conviction, the "stickability" of the new Christ-believers. Such recognition of their reality is part of Paul's attempt to restore good relations.

Verse 5b This half verse seems unexpected. As part of his evocation of how they came to faith, Paul hints (!) at his own behaviour. The Thessalonians must have doubted that he was as sincere as he had appeared at the time. His failure to come and even worse his sending of a "second in command" must have left them wondering had they misread Paul's love for them. Was he really so sincere? Chapters 2 and 3 will tell more.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Have you had the experience of people praying for you and how did you feel? Have you prayed seriously for others?
2. Like the Thessalonians, are you under pressure for your faith? Are you able to bring it into prayer?

PRAYER

Good and loving God, deepen our love, strengthen our faith, enliven our hope that we may know the power the Spirit in our everyday lives. Amen.

For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by name

Isa 45:1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
 whose right hand I have grasped
 to subdue nations before him
 and strip kings of their robes,
 to open doors before him—
 and the gates shall not be closed:
 2 *I will go before you
 and level the mountains,
 I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
 and cut through the bars of iron,*
 3 *I will give you the treasures of darkness
 and riches hidden in secret places,
 so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*
 4 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your name,
 I surname you, though you do not know me.
 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other;
 besides me there is no god.
 I arm you, though you do not know me,
 6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
 and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
 I am the LORD, and there is no other.
 7 *I form light and create darkness,
 I make weal and create woe;
 I the LORD do all these things.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In our passage, a major change of government is presented as part of God's very own government of history. Cyrus, king of Persia, entered Babylon on 29 October 539 bc. He controlled by decentralisation and hence he permitted the exiles to return. In the eyes of Isaiah, Cyrus became an instrument of God (see titles below!). In our passage, it is Cyrus who is addressed and called. The insistence on monotheism was perhaps unnecessary as Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, who already believed in only one God.

KIND OF WRITING

Within the narrative world of Second Isaiah, we are in the heavenly court and we are overhearing a divine edict proclaiming and installing Cyrus as God's instrument. The full text of seven verses underlines with considerable emphasis that this is all God's initiative. Accordingly, the passage is quite hymnic, with the following shape:

- v.1a: YHWH addresses Cyrus
- v.1bc: The purpose God's call
- v.2-3a: YHWH will go before you

v.3b-7: that all may know it is YHWH

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Within Second Isaiah, our reading has a particular outline, being part of a slightly longer section.

- A. YHWH speaks to Israel (44.24-28)
- B. YHWH speaks to Cyrus (45:1-7)
- C. YHWH speaks to Israel (45:8-13)

In all three sections, Cyrus is named:

"...who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose"; and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." (Is 44:28). I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the LORD of hosts. (Is 45:13)

RELATED PASSAGES

(i) Cyrus is mentioned by name in Is 44:28–45:1; 45:13. He was a real historical figure (see the cylinder above). He assumed the titles of kingships which he had conquered. In Egypt, he was proclaimed Son of Re. In the Bible, apart

from being named, he is referred to as Shepherd, the Lord's Anointed (= messiah, literally) and Servant.

(ii) Cyrus permitted the return to Judah and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is reflected in Ezra 1:1-8.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 "Anointed" was usually reserved for priests or kings. Eventually, Judaism used the term for an expected deliverer or messiah. Earlier, God had used the Assyrians to punish Israel and now he uses the Persians to restore his chosen ones. "Taking the hand" is very daring because the ruler of Babylon took hold of the hand of Bel at the New Year's festival. Gates were indeed opened for Cyrus, under the grace of YHWH.

Verse 4 It is YHWH, that is God as revealed to Israel, who is speaking. Cyrus knows God, of course, but not yet YHWH, the lord of history. The motive for God's choice is his election of Israel.

Verse 5 In vv. 15-17 and 23-24, it is possible that Cyrus responds to this calling of the God unknown to him.

Verse 6 The universal scope of God's vision apparent: from east to west.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is not only Cyrus who was called to bring about relief and be an instrument of hope: all of us are the hands of God in our own time and place. Give thanks to God for calling and gifts and ask him that you may use them well.

2. "I call you by name, though you do not know me" speaks to the experience of us all. A marvellous line from Ps 81 may help: *I hear a voice I had not known: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden."* (Ps 81:5-6)

PRAYER

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96 (95); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel relativises human government in favour of God's claim on all humanity. The first reading, in a different way, teaches the very same thing.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 96 (95) is a great hymn of praise. It is very suitable because it seems to inhabit the same theological and linguistic world as Second Isaiah.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

The great exile in Babylon—587-539 BC—was catastrophic for the Israelites. When it did eventually come to an end and it was possible to return to Judea and Jerusalem, the ruler who made all this happen was a foreigner, Cyrus of Persia. Not surprisingly, he was remembered with the deepest gratitude. In our reading, God appoints Cyrus as the historical agent of his will.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

We begin reading today from the earliest surviving Christian writing, the first letter to the Thessalonians. At the time of writing, the Thessalonians were undergoing harassment and persecution. In his opening prayer, Paul reflects on their fabulous reaction to his proclamation of the Gospel.

Gospel

Matthew 22:15-21

Some supposed admirers try to trip up Jesus and he very neatly trips them up in return. However, there is more to the scene than clever verbal battles.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 19 October

St John Brébeuf and companions, martyrs

Ephesians 2:1-10

Our reading contrasts our life apart from faith and our life now in Jesus. There is a great reminder of just who we are in the phrase "you are God's work of art" (JB).

Luke 12:13-21

There is a prayer in the psalms which runs, "Lord make us know the shortness of our life." Usually, we need no reminding, but, as we heart the Gospel, sometimes we do, as we listen to Jesus, the teaching of wisdom.

Tuesday 20 October

Ephesians 2:12-22

It might seem that the concerns of this reading are confined to the first century: the communion of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. It is much greater than that: God was reaching out to *all of humanity without distinction*, showing us how much he loves us..

Luke 12:35-38

Parables of watchfulness are not uncommon but this one contains a major role reversal: the master *will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on his own slaves*. The story of the washing of the feet in John's Gospel comes to mind as does another sentence from Jesus: "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45).

Wednesday 21 October

Ephesians 3:2-12

Sometimes, we can be so at home in the faith that a sense of wonder and transcendence may no longer be present. Our reading today should restore our feelings of awe before the mystery of our life in Christ.

Luke 12:39-48

The Gospel reading—from the "gentle" Luke—is both comforting and uncomfortable. It is comforting: fidelity will be rewarded. It is uncomfortable: there are consequence to our choices. Originally, it was aimed at disciples who had become complacent about God's mercy. This may well be a risk to day as well.

Thursday 22 October

St John Paul II, bishop of Rome

Ephesians 3:14-21

The writer bursts into prayer—and what a prayer! The reading lifts up our eyes from the everyday to see just how marvellous our life in Christ really is.

Luke 12:49-53

There is a strange juxtaposition of images at the start of this Gospel: fire and water. Fire points to purification and judgement, part of the tradition proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Water points to Jesus' own role in the coming of that Kingdom. The verses which follow reflect early Christian experience. When a family member become a disciple, often this created difficulties with society in general and family in particular. This is becoming the case again today.

Friday 23 October

St John of Capistrano, priests

Ephesians 4:1-6

Even in earliest Christianity, conflict was the normal experience. Normal doesn't mean acceptable and so the advice given here applies today as much as ever before.

Luke 12:54-59

The first part of today's short Gospel is a clear invitation to read the signs of the times and not to miss the moment of grace. The second part is more of a puzzle. Why did Jesus talk about taking your opponent to court? Firstly, it does reflect culture of Palestine at the time. Secondly, it teaching that now is the time to accept the gift of reconciliation already achieved in Jesus.

Saturday 24 October

St Anthony Mary Claret, bishop

Ephesians 4:7-16

What does it mean to be part of the body of Christ? It means enjoying the different gifts so that flourishing individually we may grow in love.

Luke 13:1-9

Again, we have a reading in two parts. The first part is severe warning: you cannot tell when you life will end. We know this for our own experience of the unpredictable. The second part is a parable of "second chance." Again, it does speak of a second opportunity, but *now is the time. See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!* (2 Corinthians 6:2)