

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, May 10th 2016

Jesus' prayer recorded in today's gospel embraces a mystery that extends through time, even to us in our modern age. In what has been called his "high priestly prayer", Jesus petitions the Father for himself and also for his disciples. This prayer reveals that Jesus was not working independently, but doing the work of the Father in bringing the gift of eternal life. And oddly enough, others are part of this work, too. This prayer for his disciples shows that they are also part of the salvific gift, agents participating in a divine plan that invited their cooperation. Indeed, Jesus knew that when he left this world, others who belong to God would continue the work.

I find it remarkable that God entrusts anything of significance to humans. We are hard to educate. Jesus had to spend a lot of time teaching the disciples, and it seems they often still did not understand. Motivation is also a problem. We are prone to sloth; others are afflicted by fear; others who bypass these sins just squabble over who gets the credit when things turn out well. And then there is the matter of faithlessness and discouragement, which seems to strike all of us from time to time.

Those of us who work with junior colleagues know that doing it yourself is usually the expeditious way, but it is not the way to grow human capital. We need to give others a chance to try and to succeed. Success, particularly the second or third time around, is sweeter this way -- and confidence building, too.

Today's first reading, Paul's address to the presbyters in the book of Acts, strikes my ears as rather smug the first time through. I know you are a good guy, Paul, and that you take your commitments seriously. But maybe you could lighten up a little?

Maybe something is lost to us when we fail to hear his own method of delivery. Perhaps there is more tenderness in his voice, and perhaps his words would be tempered by the known reality of his life lived among us, including his suffering and his genuine love and affection. And of course, we know he had quite a past to overcome, with persecution and such. Paul's transformation and faithful witness is a fulfillment of Jesus' priestly prayer -- an example of one who jumped into a relationship with both feet, so to speak, even when that meant marching off into suffering. Maybe this reading can help us to learn to think more deeply about the person speaking to us, so that we are receptive to the good they offer and not so easily turned off by tone and our own sensibilities.

People can rise to the occasion and behave heroically, as Paul did. We hope that when they do, it does not go to their head so that they are too hard on the rest of us. After the resurrection, Jesus carried a

message of peace, even to doubting Thomas. There is no evidence that Jesus appeared to his “enemies” other than to Paul, and this was for the purpose of bringing Paul into the work of the Gospel, not to condemn him. We could do with more of this approach, too.

When we are succeeding, how can we be gentle in bringing along others to work with us? And when we are failing, how can we not lose confidence, but instead respond to the call to get back into the saddle and try again? These are points of tension for us, which we encounter often as we live out this mystery of growing, learning, and cooperating with the work of God in our midst, and passing it along. Thanks be to God.

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