

First Conference April 2<sup>nd</sup>2020

Being a disciple – staying with Jesus

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.*

*Let us pray. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit instruct s hearts of your faithful grant us, in the same Holy Spirit to be truly wise and always to rejoice in his consolation through Christ our Lord.*

Following Jesus as his disciple is the compelling question for a Christian. It was always thus. What could it mean to be a disciple of Jesus during this eerie virus-laden phase? In a crisis, it is important to go back to basics. I choose the Gospel of John where he is recounting the story of the first disciples.

*The next day, John was again standing there with two of his disciples, and looking at Jesus walking by, he said: Look, there is the Lamb of God. The two disciples heard him saying this and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned around, and seeing the two following him, said: “What are you looking for?” They answered “Rabbi, which translated means teacher, Rabbi, where are you staying?” He said to them “Come and see”. They went and saw where he was staying, and remained with him. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. (John 1: 36-39)*

Would that being a disciple could be reduced to an unembellished memory of this pivotal moment. I recall lines from a poem of William Butler Yeats *The Second Coming*:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.  
Things fall apart, the center cannot hold.  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*

*The ceremony of innocence is drowned.*

What is the center of being a disciple of Jesus in the vortex of a pandemic? Can this hold any more? Taking into consideration the passage I quoted from the gospel of John, the center is linked to staying with Jesus. It is not a matter of turning up from time to time to say 'hello' to Jesus, or sending Him an imaginary text demanding an immediate answer with His GPS location. The disciple stays with Jesus. It is about how I live, trying to listen to the words of Jesus in my life. To be a disciple requires that I hang on every word Jesus speaks to us. I cannot afford to stop focusing. In my younger days, my hobby was fishing. No day passed quicker than a day on the Corrib Lake, following the apparently inane routine of persistently looking at where my cast had landed. Take my eyes off that, even briefly, and I might miss the one bite that was coming my way.

Staying with Jesus, being attentive to Him, is the heart of the matter. Of course, it is problematic how this can be done. Even before this unnerving emergency, I was finding it tough to focus on anything for more than a few fleeting seconds. Concentrating has not become easier with what is happening in our universe. Still, I insist that the foundation of being a disciple of Jesus is to be persistently attentive in his presence.

You could put a reasonable question to me. Where is the Jesus I am talking about? Come and see – fine, but where is He?

We, religious and priests, tended to be certain about where Jesus was. Go into a church – you will find Jesus there. Most Irish people cannot even get into a church at this point. Go to your favorite beach and appreciate the presence of God in the wondrous panorama of nature. Many cannot do that either, because they are cocooned or because it is not within the two-kilometer radius allowed for exercise. Should I simply drop my remarks about the core of discipleship as the staying-with-Jesus? Based on the gospel passage I quoted, that would be a cop out.

In this exceptional moment of human history, where could this Jesus be?

Again, a poet comes to mind. Poets undeniably articulate ideas better. I take four of the simpler lines from a longish poem *The Sleeping Lord* by the Welsh poet David Jones. Jones is little known in Ireland, perhaps because

some of his central writing is about the religious quest for God, not an immediate candidate for a best-seller list. He was born in Wales at the turn of the last century. The son of a preacher, he knew his Scriptures. Life and art made him question so much. He spent 17 continuous weeks on the Front during World War One. He was a fine artist, I am told, though it is one of his poems I quote from. *The Sleeping Lord* was 30 years in the writing. Jones converted to Catholicism, though it is the broader question of God that perplexed him. He pursued the meaning of his often-tortured life in different ways – art, pleasure, philosophy.

*I have been on my guard*

*Not to condemn the unfamiliar*

*For it is easy to miss him*

*At the turn of a civilization.*

Whatever is happening looks like a turn of a civilization. What will we make of it all – if we live long enough – is another matter. It is important not to jump too far ahead in our assessment. Everything is changing by the day. Our lust for certainty is so strong that we want a fully rational explanation right now. That is an illusion.

Better live with the anxiety of this fragile moment and not anticipate the answers we might get in the future. A constant temptation of professional people, such as religious and priests, is to fabricate answers for everything. That is how we were trained. We need to unlearn so much. David Jones is correct – *I have been on my guard not to condemn the unfamiliar*. This crisis is not just unfamiliar, it is unprecedented since the Middle Ages and the Black Death. Notice why Jones says it is essential not to condemn the unfamiliar: *it is easy to miss him at the turn of a civilization*.

Where is Jesus? We know he is not in the familiar places of a few weeks ago. However, if the gospel of John is accurate, He is still asking us to 'come and see'. The disciples went, and stayed for the day. What happened after that first day has something to tell us, too. The disciples proved to be slow learners. Nonetheless, Jesus did not turn his back on them.

Those first disciples were in a fortunate position. They were personally with Jesus for a period of about three years. Consider the mistakes they

made – the jealousies among them, their inability to understand a lot of what Jesus was saying, and a full-scale betrayal. Nothing explains the slow learning curve of the first disciples better than their behavior at the Last Supper. Confusion is too mild a word for their reaction to what Jesus was doing. *“We do not understand what you are saying”*

We are unlikely to be much better than the first disciples. That is a consolation. Mistakes are not the important thing in life, our sins do not condemn us forever. Failure is not the final word. What is important is that we have attempted the first step of trying to stay with Jesus. That perspective colors everything. I stop worrying. During these days, we could nourish ourselves more with the Word of God. The disciples on the trek towards Emmaus were still confused. What happened? *Jesus opened their eyes when talking about the scriptures. Then, starting from Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them the passages about himself throughout the Scriptures. (Luke 24:27)* The Word of God may surprise us as well.

More important than saying that I can be consoled by the mistakes of the first disciples, is to recall that Jesus never turned his back on them. Mercy is the proper name of God. No matter what we do, Jesus will be there when we return.

Am I implying that everyone has to be a Christian? No. Some of the best people we all know are not Christians. They are wonderful people. A mistake we Christians make is to think that we are morally superior to others who do not share our faith. That is patently not true. Being a Christian is not firstly a moral imperative— it is saying that our faith is grounded in a personal relationship of staying with Jesus. I go to see where Jesus is, and I stay with him. Being with Jesus will take us to the strangest situations in life, and have us interact with people whom we, humanly, might prefer not to meet. A good Christian automatically mixes in strange company, has the most curious friends. What is more: the virtuous Christian never judges others. The reason is simple. Jesus did not, and if we stay with Jesus, we will not either.

Of course, I am apprehensive and nervous. However, I am trying not to be worried, in the sense of doubting the ongoing awareness of having chosen to follow Jesus and to stay with him. *My peace I give you.* I am living in a religious community where some of my confreres are even older than I am. I want to stay with Jesus and I am trying to be on my guard that I will not ignore the unfamiliar. There is no need to lose our inner peace. Pope Francis

**lives in a house in Rome where a number of the priests living there have tested positive for the virus, Thank God, Francis is also following the protocols in place in Italy, but he seems to be still smiling and calling us all back to the joy of the gospel. It is a joy comes from the desire to stay with Jesus.**

**There is another, and weightier, consequence to staying with Jesus. The Gospel of John helps us here as well. *Where I am there, my servant will also be* (12.26). *Where Jesus is, is close to the Father's heart*, as John states in chapter 1, verse 18. We are called to be with Jesus not merely in terms of our mission and service to our sisters and brothers, particularly those in maximum distress. We follow Jesus not only to the ends of the earth. We follow him to be where he is – next to the heart of the Father.**

***Amen, Amen I say to you, on his own the Son can do nothing. He can only do what he sees the Father doing, and whatever the father does the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he himself does (John 5:9)***

***Amen, Amen I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of bread. Do not work for food that corrupts, but work for food that endures for eternal life which the Son of man will give you – for on him the father has set his seal (John 6:26).***

**Staying with Jesus as a disciple is not just a private comfy relationship with Jesus meek and mild and merciful. We are going where Jesus has gone – and he has gone not only to the outcasts (that also, obviously) He is going to the Father from whom he came.**

**We are approaching Holy Week. The disciples see what Jesus is doing as he exposes himself to mortal danger. They also see, even if they do not wholly grasp it, that Jesus is doing what the Father is doing.**

**I have woven a conference with a simple thread. Our vocation is to be a disciple of Jesus, and that is what we claim to be. It is a legitimate claim, despite the horrific witness of some of our lives.**

**To avoid any temptation of reducing our relationship with Jesus to a life of banal piety or – even worse – a crusade of fundamentalist preaching, we are surely meant to make a connection between the seeing and doing of Jesus in relation, not just to the disciples, but in relationship with his Father.**

The first disciples were being prepared to see this in the stunning clarity of the glory of the Cross.

With the thread that I have woven, there is a pattern that I hinted at earlier. To be a disciple, it is not sufficient to give the occasional hello-call to him. Think of this. The relationship of Jesus is not a series of episodes like what you might get in a TV series. Jesus does not simply get an occasional bit of instruction from the Father, wanting to know how He is doing. The relationship of Jesus to his Father is sustained and unbroken. He is always trying to do His father's will. The great prayer of all Christian disciples re-echoes this. *Our father who art in heaven, thy will be done ...*

*Now the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified .... Whoever serves me must follow me, and my servant will be with me wherever I am. My Father will honor whoever serves me .... Now my soul is troubled. What shall I say? Father save me from this hour? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name"*

It is understandable that anxieties gnaw at our heart during the current pandemic. It is also acceptable that we look to the future when the pandemic will ease.

Let us not forget the past. Jesus has made us a wonderful promise that if we come, see and stay with him, we will be surprised where that will lead us. It will lead us to the heart of the world but, more decisively, it will lead us to heart of the mystery of the Trinity – the Father who sent Jesus to be one of us and whose Spirit is still at work. I am grateful for the witness of so many people, Christians and others, to the inclusive love of the Spirit of the one God.

The Memorare is a very consoling Marian prayer. It can be poignantly meaningful at this moment:

Remember, o most gracious Virgin Mary,

That never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection

Implored your help or sought your intercession was left unaided.

Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto you, o Virgin of Virgins, my Mother.

To you do I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful,

O mother of the Word Incarnate,

**Despise not my petition but, in your mercy hear and answer me.**

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