

Easter 5 2022

John 13: 31-35

There are three important ideas in the passage; Jesus' glorification, his departure, and his new commandment. None of these feels particularly new but I found my hook as I began to think around the theme of power and weakness.

We probably associate glorification with power and prestige and worldly influence. But Jesus' glorification would be very different. The initial response to Jesus' death was that it was a cause for shame and that it came through weakness. The Resurrection reported by gospel writers told the full story of how Jesus' actions brought glory to the Father.

This issue of weakness and power struck a chord in me as I reflected on these qualities and the priestly vocation. I recalled my trauma associated with the whole idea of ordination to the priesthood. How could I possibly join that rank? Mind you, I have been wounded by several priests since the idealistic days when I looked up to all who held priestly office. I have seen the very best and the very worst since then. The power of the priest is an important issue, and one you need to think carefully about as you search for a new priest.

Today I am going to share with you some thoughts from the Very Rev Michael Buckley Rector of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkley. These themes come from an address given to ordinands the night before ordination. He sets up his discussion around this question; Is this man or woman weak enough to be a priest? Buckley teases out the idea out. Is this man deficient enough so that he so that he can't ward off significant suffering from his life, so that he lives with a certain amount of failure so that he feels what it is to be an average man? Because it is in this deficiency, in this interior lack, in this weakness (maintains the book of Hebrews), that the efficacy of the ministry and the priesthood of Christ lies. **Wow what an idea!**

This question helped me as I moved towards my ordination. As I was told by the best priest I have ever encountered that none of us is ever ready for ordination, none of us is ever worthy. I wonder what you expect of the man or woman you want to lead you in the future. Will you want extraordinary-life skills, and technical and musical abilities or do you want a priest who can sympathise with weakness? Buckley maintains that it is necessary to enter into

the seriousness of this question. He maintains that there is a conjunction between deficiency and weakness and the priesthood.

What he means by weakness is not the experience of sin, but the experience of a peculiar liability to suffering. He says this suffering is known as profound sense of inability even after great effort to create what the individual wants. The inability to secure one's own future, to protect oneself, to live with clarity and assurance, or to ward off shame and suffering is vital. Because he says if one is clever enough, or devious enough or poised enough, these difficulties can be surmounted or avoided all together. Buckley says that the weak man must become like what he touches, the body of Christ. That happens at the Eucharist. How did Christ understand his body? It was broken for us. It is in this ritual of breaking of bread that the priest becomes effective.

Last week I said that my role is in holding a space open for the Holy Spirit. I must do that in an acknowledgement of my weakness as well as the weakness of our collective humanity. But here is Buckley's important message, God's power is made manifest in weakness.

The question for me personally and the priest you will soon choose is; can we remain vulnerable and open just as Jesus was? To remain vulnerable means that we know what it is to be powerless and we know pain. This is where a priest maintains compassion.

If a priest does not remain weak but is focused on prestige, privilege and accomplishment their point of reference will shift away from people.

Empathy for a broad range of people is important. So rather than seeing weakness as a flaw, it may be a strength. In worldly terms Jesus' may have appeared weak to some onlookers, we know his humble ability to trust in the Father's love was his strength and glory.

The next theme in our gospel is Jesus' announcement of his death and resurrection. He uses the language of a journey. He tells the followers he is going to a place where they cannot follow him. But this will not be a permanent separation. He goes to prepare a place for them and in the words of the NRSV he will come back and take his followers to himself. These familiar words always make me cringe because of the connotations of lack of freedom as Jesus' "takes" people away. This week I read something that made me really happy. Several commentators claim these words are better translated as I will "receive you to myself". The image of receiving rather than taking is both

gentle and welcoming! This wording reflects a strong Johannine theme of the disciples, Jesus, and the Father are sharing a spiritual communion through the agency of the Holy Spirit¹.

The third theme of this gospel is Jesus' new commandment. Love one another **as I have loved you**.

This appeal to love was not entirely new. Leviticus said love the stranger who lives as a foreigner with you as the native-born among you and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18,34) Jesus' directive goes further. Love one another as I have loved you. He gives a concrete example! There was a new way that Jesus practiced love, namely through service and the best example was through washing the feet of his disciple's feet.

Grounding ourself in welcoming love is a fascinating theme and a deep challenge for each of us.

The Lord Be With You.

Reference

The Very Rev. Michael J Buckley, SJ.

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Vena, O. *Commentary on John 13: 31-35* WWWeb

¹ Vena, O. *Commentary on the Fifth Sunday of Easter*. p 2