

Sisters of St Joseph Lochinvar 125th Anniversary

Reflection on the Gospel

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In my reflection on the readings we have just heard today, I will focus in the Gospel. The Gospel in particular offers us rich language and images with which to reflect on the focus of our celebration today, the 125 yrs of life and work of the Sisters of St Joseph of Lochinvar in the Maitland diocese and beyond.

Today's Gospel passage comes from the very centre of Jesus' great farewell speech in the Gospel of John. Jesus has finished his work of proclaiming the glory of God to the world and is moving to the final phases of his life, where he will show God's glory in paradoxical form, in his complete gift of himself even to the point of death. The Johannine writer presents this speech as Jesus' most intense statement of his own relationship with God, of Jesus' own meaning and purpose as he comes to the close of his life and of his love for his disciples, his friends.

In the small part of this speech that we heard today, Jesus is preparing his disciples for a phase in their lives when he will no longer be with them as he had been in his earthly life, when they came to know him. Jesus will no longer be among them in the ordinary ways in which we are present to one another. Jesus promises to be present to his friends in the Spirit, a new form of his presence with which they will have to grow familiar. Here, ahead of time, Jesus prepares them for what this different, indeed strange, experience of his presence will be like.

First, and most importantly, Jesus sets everything that he will say in the secure place of his relationship with God. As God has loved Jesus, so Jesus loves his disciples and loves us. From the beginning of this Gospel, Jesus has been the one who makes God known to us; God, whom we cannot see. Here in today's reading, Jesus is the pivot-point between God and us. The love that exists between the Father and Jesus is the love with which Jesus holds his disciples to himself. Jesus does not merely inform us about God: Jesus lives God's very way of being into us. This connection is so fundamental, that Jesus commands his disciples to "abide" in this divine love in which he relates to them.

Our passage today follows directly on from Jesus talking about himself, his Father and his friends being united in the way a grape-vine is. In this image of the vine, Jesus uses the language of "abiding," an expression that we hear often in this Gospel. "Abiding" suggests more than just staying with someone for a time: it has the sense

of settling, of dwelling in a place for a long time. Jesus explains to his disciples that in relating to him they are one of a piece with him: they are branches that dwell in the vine. Neither branch nor vine survives without the other. The vine is nothing without branches; the branches have no way to be together, except for their connection with the vine. Both vine and branches must dwell in each other, so that the same sap flows among them all.

Jesus' disciples will experience his presence with them after he has been raised from death, in very different, new ways. In one of these ways, the disciples themselves take an active part. In the way they relate to one another, Jesus' disciples continue the distinctive character of Jesus' presence with them. That is, Jesus commands them to abide in love with one another in just the same way that Jesus himself loved them. In today's Gospel reading, this love is the 'sap' that holds the vine together so that it can flourish and bear rich, abundant fruit.

Jesus plays with this word "love" in a number of ways. It is something that the Father does, that Jesus does and Jesus' disciples are commanded to do. It is also an attitude or a state that the Father, Jesus and Jesus' disciples can offer to one another. The word that Jesus uses for love here, as many as nine times in nine verses, is *agapē*. This word suggests a deliberate and sincere choice to hold a person in good favour, to appreciate them, to foster in their lives, all that is good for them.

Yet Jesus also uses another word for love when he calls his disciples three times, his "friends." The word used here, "philous," comes from a different Greek root from *agapē*. This second word stresses more the spontaneous, natural love between people who like each other, who have an affinity for each other. Jesus says that for these people, these disciples that he regards as his friends, he is prepared to go further than ordinary friendship usually calls for. He is prepared to love them with God's self-forgetting love, even to the point of putting his own life at risk for them.

And in another way Jesus makes it clear that he is not talking merely to friends, people he happens to like. Jesus seems strange in this passage because he speaks of "commanding" his friends that they love one another. It seems to be a condition of their being his friends that they love one another as he has commanded them. Yet, Jesus insists that his friends are not subservient to him; they are not underlings; they are not "slaves." In the ancient world, slaves were non-persons; they were property that could be disposed of like any other goods and chattels. Far from this, Jesus declares that his disciples are friends because Jesus has revealed all the inner family secrets entrusted to him by his Father, to these friends. As Jesus has already told Philip earlier in this long speech, he has actually revealed the Father himself to them.

The greatest revelation Jesus makes about God is that God loves as Jesus loves, which Jesus expresses by being prepared to put his own life aside for the sake of his friends.

Finally, Jesus tells his friends that it is not by some quirk of chance that they have ended up together as a collection of friends. At a level deeper than human management alone can control, Jesus has chosen these friends and for a serious purpose. As branches of the vine, their task is to bear fruit, fruit that will “abide,” or “last.” As the life of God, God’s self-forgetting love, abides in the vine and its branches, so the fruit of this vine should also have an abiding quality. Unlike ordinary fruit that ripens and then dies, the fruit that comes from the lives of these disciples will endure. In this way, as Jesus now reveals it to them, his disciples will be able to continue together, supporting one another in faithful relationship with God, when Jesus is no longer present among them. Indeed, Jesus’ purpose is that these disciples will be able to speak to the Father in Jesus’ name, as though they are sons like Jesus, and God will respond as a Father does to his true children. Jesus’ final word then, is to command his intimate friends to love each other, putting aside self in order to promote the good of the other.

From both the other readings, from Ben Sirah and from the first letter of Peter, we hear practical advice and encouragement about how human beings can live in authentic relationship with God. Ben Sirah is aware of God’s great goodness and prays for peace in his time. Peter’s first letter suggests ways to live *agapē* love: by resisting the natural challenge to pursue revenge, choosing instead not to “repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay[ing] with a blessing.” This letter speaks to people who may well have known persecution, perhaps mostly by being despised and misjudged by others who did not understand Christian faith. “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right,” 1 Peter says, “you are blessed,” because you know Christ as Lord.

Nothing in this life lasts forever. Those who knew Jesus in his earthly life in the flesh had to learn that he was given for a time only. Jesus’ first disciples had to discover how to stay in relationship with Jesus, the one who had “the words of eternal life,” when he was no longer present with them in the ordinary way of human beings. We hear today Jesus calling his first disciples to move beyond their first knowledge of him to a greater, richer and more free relationship made possible by the gift of the Spirit. We hear today also, Jesus’ words calling *us* afresh into a new, richer and more free relationship with him, that draws us into the life of God.

As we celebrate today, 125 years of the life and work of the Sisters of St Joseph of Lochinvar in this diocese and beyond it, we remember the life of God that has been

abiding with us, this group of Sisters. The life of God has produced much fruit among us and has slowly been gathering a rich meaning as our story has developed. As God has abided in us, so we have abided in this part of the world, in the Diocese of Maitland and beyond. We hope, indeed we believe, that we have borne fruit in many ways – the thousands upon thousands of students we have taught over a century and a quarter, the many communities in which we have lived and served, the very Catholic Education system itself that we helped to establish – all these are visible signs at least, of the fruit that we have borne. We believe – it is central to our sense of who we are – that in living and working as we do we have participated in God’s great act of bringing all creation to its full development, being drawn into God’s love.

Above all, we hope that we are -- each of us individually and all of us together as a body of religious women -- growing more and more authentically into the relationship with God and with one another which Jesus makes available to us in his life, death and resurrection. We are friends of one another and friends with people throughout the Maitland-Newcastle diocese and beyond. We rejoice in the easy, happy life of these friendships and the way they make life joyful. At the same time, we also celebrate today the love with which God sustains the world, a love that chooses each person in this church for God’s purposes, a love that is larger than human systems of management. For the faithfulness of this loving God in our journey we give thanks with all our hearts, as our Psalm sang it for us. as I conclude this reflection, I invite you to sing this Psalm’s refrain another time: “Lord, I thank you for your faithfulness and love, love that knows no end.”