

The Fifth Sunday after Easter Day

May 2, 2021

Said Mass with Music

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

1 John 3:18–24; Psalm 66:1–8; John 14:15–24

During my freshman year in high school, I volunteered for the school newspaper. My first assignment was to interview the director of the autumn musical, who was somewhat amused as I tried rather mechanically to ask him questions that would elicit useful answers to the journalist's five basic questions, the so-called Ws—who, what, when, where, and why. The all-knowing managing editor of the paper—he was a junior and all of seventeen years old—had taught me the importance of those questions just days before I set out on that interview. In truth, it took me a while to get the hang of those five Ws, but I've never forgotten them. It turns out that those five questions really are pretty fundamental. In one way or another, they go back to Aristotle, who bequeathed them to Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle used those questions to assess the morality of human action. So, they are useful, and they have a noble lineage.

If you think about it, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, taken together, do a good job of telling us about Jesus by answering those questions. The

creeds aren't stories and they're certainly not journalism, but they do state essential truths about God, God's Son, the Spirit, and the life of the disciple in the world, in the church, and in the life to come. They help us to focus on the basics, which is what the W questions are meant to do.

Then, there are the gospels. The gospels are stories, of course, and as stories they've stood the test of time. In their own way they also answer the five W questions: Jesus of Nazareth, beloved Son of God, Son of Man, Word made flesh; sent to proclaim and embody God's dominion; born in Bethlehem, Tiberius the emperor, raised in Nazareth, baptized in the Jordan; ministers around Judea, Galilee, and the Decapolis, teaching, healing, feeding, working miracles, forgiving sins, calling disciples, telling stories, having discussions about Torah, morality, and God with religious experts; talking and eating with the curious, the friendly, the seeking, the grieving, the suspicious and the hostile; capable of wit and irony; an able debater, amazing many and moving more with his wisdom, forthrightness, insight, compassion, and love; arrested when Pilate was governor and Herod Antipas was tetrarch; tried, tortured, executed, and, crucially, rising from the dead; then, astoundingly, appearing to his bereft, confused and guilt-ridden followers. The evangelists tell us who Jesus was and what he did so we

know who we're dealing with if we decide, with hope in our hearts, to follow him into an unknown future.

Which brings us to today's gospel passage, found in chapter fourteen of John's gospel, one of the four chapters that modern commentators call "The Farewell Discourse." Now, that title suggests that John intends to answer some of those W questions in these chapters and he does: Jesus speaks to his disciples at the Last Supper, just before his arrest and trial. He says his goodbyes and leaves his disciples with words of wisdom and comfort to prepare them for his departure. On the surface, these chapters tell us things about Jesus-in-the-world. John gives us Jesus' last will and testament, a very human, this-world sort of thing to do. We've seen this before. Moses says farewell to the people of Israel. He dies. He doesn't go with the people into the Promised Land, and so there is a finality to his words. Because of that, Moses' words solidify the memory of who he is and what he has done. They are meant to fill the hole created by his absence (see Deuteronomy 31–34).

But John the Evangelist is doing something different in the Farewell Discourse. In these four chapters, he explodes the five Ws. He intends to show us that Jesus will not be constrained by the framework of where and

when. Jesus is not just a set of facts, a news story, a set of answers designed to satisfy our idle curiosity.

In these chapters, John tells us that Jesus is going away. He's about to leave and he *must* leave. He must die so we may live. But this necessary departure will make it possible for Jesus to return. As readers of the gospels, we know that Jesus does in fact return and *will* be witnessed by his disciples. This too is necessary. This is the divine and holy seed that gives birth to resurrection as a force in the world. But that's not the end of the story, is it? The Risen Lord will leave, he *does* leave, once again. He ascends. He goes to the Father; and so, if we ask the "where" question, it seems that we must answer: He is not here, not here where we can see and touch and know him as his disciples once did. In this, we become like Saint Thomas, lovers of the concrete and the tangible, demanding clear-cut answers to when and where and how.

But in this morning's gospel Jesus takes down the constricting walls of where and when and how. Yes, Jesus is now in the world, and yes he is about to leave it. But he promises not to abandon his disciples or leave them orphaned forever. He will return. But how? He will send another Counselor—presumably Jesus is the first—and this other Counselor, this *Helper*, is the Spirit of Truth. But Jesus tells us that *he* is Truth, so it

must be that the Spirit “helps” us by making Jesus, his words, his wisdom, his commandments, and his love present to us. We cannot touch Jesus. But he touches us, for the Spirit dwells in you and me; and this makes for a very different way of knowing. In Jesus, the where and the when get wobbly. As Saint Paul puts it, “And [Jesus] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer.” (2 Corinthians 5:15–16).

In his book *Gate to the Heart*, the late Hasidic teacher, Reb Zalman Schechter-Shalomi of blessed memory, writes, “If we were to make a distinction between the mystical and the dogmatic elements in religious practice, the distinction would boil down to how much of the experiential element is present. Mystical doctrine claims that we can experience the Infinite right now, that beneath the surface of the obvious, there exists Divinity.”¹

Reb Zalman’s words help me as a Christian to understand what Jesus and Saint John are saying to me

¹ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman M., *Gate to the Heart: A Manual of Contemplative Jewish Practice* (Boulder, CO: Albion-Andalus Books, 2013, p. 6)

this morning: Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, *reveals the Infinite*. Paradoxically, he gives the Infinite a face. He is sent by the Father and it is to the Father that he returns. But, still, through the power of the Spirit he returns to us, over and over and over again, in every moment, if we will let him, showing us that “beneath the surface of the obvious,” suddenly, there is God and inexhaustible grace. Jesus tells us that because of love—his love for us and our love for each other—the Infinite has the power to make things new—to transform even fear, anxiety, and resistance to change; even sin, even death. In Jesus, God has the power to make a new creation, even now, in *this* world, the world of when and where and how. In Jesus, God gives us hope. In Jesus, Jeremiah’s words take on flesh, “For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you” (Jeremiah 29:11–12).

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