

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. . . . On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

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As many of you probably know,

It is commencement time at Yale University.

Tomorrow morning,

Students from every corner of that institution will gather together at the school’s “Old Campus” for a ceremonial degree ceremony

Afterwards, we will all head back to our respective departments for a more personalized ceremony.

It’s a rare chance for the university to see all of its constituent parts –

For us to come together as a community and see that we are larger than just the professional school or degree program we’ve been engulfed in for the last two, or three, or four, or more years.

For my part, I can’t quite believe that my three years at Yale –

And here at St. Thomas’s –

Are coming to an end.

On those days when I found myself wondering what I was doing,

Why I was studying religion,

Why I decided it would be a good idea to move to the United States during an election cycle,

And especially on those days when the path ahead seemed particularly unclear,

My Yale Divinity and St. Thomas's communities have given me the strength, energy, and conviction to carry on.

Communities lived in God are one of the ways that defines God's people,

And I have known some of the very best communities here in New Haven.

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Community is at the heart of our Gospel lesson for today, though it might not seem obvious at first.

The passage opens with one of the more well-known statements from Jesus:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 14.15 NRSV.

Divorced from its larger setting like it is,

It is easy to think that,

Through the pages of Scripture,

Jesus might be speaking to us,

Individually,

Even two thousand years later.

Context, however, is everything,

And it's important to consider where and why Jesus is giving this speech.

This is from a much longer portion of John's Gospel known as the "Farewell Discourse."

It is Maundy Thursday,

The day before Jesus' death,

And the scene begins with the narrator telling the reader that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus then washes the disciples' feet,

And commands them to love one another,

Making it clear that, by their love, the world will know that they are his disciples.

Jesus then tells them that he is going to prepare a place in the Father's house for them; that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life; and that to know Jesus is to know God.

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<sup>2</sup> John 13.1a.

To know Jesus is to know God.

Personally and intimately.

Our Gospel lesson for today comes immediately after this,

And its intention seems to be one of comfort –

Because Jesus knew that he wouldn't always physically be with his followers

Not just thousands of years of later, here and now,

But mere hours later after he had suffered death on the cross.

And so he tells his followers that if they keep his commandments –

To love one another and he has loved them –

Then he will send the Advocate.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” he says.

“I am coming to you. . . . On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”<sup>3</sup>

It is here that the urge to read this as an individual encounter with Jesus must be addressed.

One of the English language's failings is that it has no clear plural form of the word “you,”

And so it is not always clear in written texts who exactly is being addressed.

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<sup>3</sup> John 14.18,20.

Yes, in the larger context of the Farewell Discourse,

The fact that Jesus is addressing all his disciples is assumed.

But if you were to pick up today's lesson and read it for yourself,

You would be forgiven for thinking that Jesus and you were having a little one-on-one personal time.

But if we were to read this passage in almost *any* other language –

Including the original Greek –

It would be obvious that Jesus is addressing a group.

A community.

A community built on love.

Throughout the Gospel narratives,

And it really doesn't matter which of the four you're reading,

Jesus is almost always seen operating within a larger, communal context.

And in all the teachings he imparts to his followers during his ministry,

Love is always at the centre.

In fact, our passage today not only puts love at the centre of the Gospel, but as its first step.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Those who are a part of Jesus' community are those who keep his commandments.

And the only way to keep those is through love.

"If you love me, you *will* keep my commandments" is not some stern order from a rigid taskmaster.

Rather, it's an invitation:

"Keeping my commandments," Jesus says, "is second nature to those who love me."

It's a promise, not a threat.

A promise that, through our love, we can do all that God requires.

And it's a promise that can *only* find its fulfillment in a community.

"On that day you" – plural – "will know that I am in my Father, and you" – plural – "in me, and I in you" – plural.

For Jesus –

For God –

It is inconceivable that his teachings would find any expression outside the larger communal setting.

And that is why Jesus speaks to the group and not the individual when he says:

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

These comforting words from Jesus are spoken to the Church,

The whole body of Christ,

And they stem from his knowledge that he will be leaving his disciples soon, and in his place God will send the Advocate.

With the help of the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth,

Jesus' followers,

From the first century to the twenty-first,

Continue to know Jesus, even though he isn't here with us now.

The central claim of the Church is that we are the community that knows something of the love of God as revealed through the person of Jesus Christ.

And through our love for one another, the world will know that we are his disciples.

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Paraclete, translated here as Advocate, is a Greek word with a legal connotation.

A paraclete was someone who advocated on your behalf at a legal proceeding,

Very similar to a lawyer today.

Jesus, knowing he has to leave his disciples,

Promises to send to them the Advocate,

The Paraclete,

Spirit of Truth.

And just as Jesus declared himself to be the truth,

We know that this Spirit –

This Holy Spirit –

Is the same Lord and giver of life who is worshipped with the Father and the Son.

This Advocate will allow the disciples,

And us,

To know the continued presence of Jesus,

To know that, through him, we have direct access to God,

Even after Jesus has gone.

The Paraclete will guide us and advocate for us in Jesus' stead,

Allowing us to know God on a level that might have been inconceivable to the Hellenistic society this Gospel was originally written for.

I think this is what is at stake for Paul when he addresses the crowd in today's reading from Acts.

Paul has noticed the idolatry in Athens and is disappointed by it.

He then points out the altar dedicated "To an unknown God,"

A placeholder altar for any god that the Athenians might have accidentally forgotten.

But this misses the point.

And so Paul explains it to them:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. . . . Indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’”<sup>4</sup>

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God,

As Paul as known God,

Is all things in all.

The God in whom the entire universe resides,

And who is in ingrained in every atom of our being.

A personal God who knows us and is known by us.

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I would like to finish by reading you an excerpt from one of Rowan Williams’s reflections on vocation:

“God,” Says Williams, “does not create human ciphers, a pool of cheap labor to whom jobs can be assigned at will. Each human being called into existence by [God] exists as a distinct part of a great interlocking web of identities. . . .

“And to talk about God as your creator means to recognize at each moment that it is [God’s] desire for you to be, and to be the person you are. It means God is willing to call you by name, at each and every moment, wanting you to be you. . . .

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 17.24,25,27b,28.

“It isn’t that God looks down from heaven at a certain moment and just drops a vocation on you, as if he were utterly uninterested and uninvolved in what’s there. If we take seriously the idea that God is faithful and doesn’t change, we need to think of God speaking over and over again the *same* Word to us—our true name, our real identity—and making us be, over and over again, in that speech of his, in his Word.”<sup>5</sup>

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God knows us,

On a deeply intimate level,

And through the Holy Spirit,

Our Advocate and Guide,

We know Jesus.

And in Jesus,

We know the Father.

And to know God is to know what’s expected of us.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Whatever we sense our vocation as the Church to be,

If we keep the love of God and the love of our community at the centre of it,

We’re bound to go right more often than we go wrong.

Because God will never leave us orphaned and alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, “Vocation (1),” in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications), 149–50.

God

Is coming to you.

And because God lives, we also will live.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.