

# Sunday Homily

## 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER

24 MAY 2020

YEAR A

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,  
so that they may be one, as we are one.”

John 17:11

### Illustration

The way that people say goodbye is very personal, particularly the big goodbyes, the ones that happen when a child goes to school for the first time, or away to university. Or when a dear colleague that we find we've got so used to leaves for another job, or a good friend emigrates, or a loved one prepares to die. In short, when the people we love move on.

Some people are very expressive: it's all tears, hugs and stories. Others are deadpan, keeping it all in. Many people make sure that they say their goodbyes beforehand, when they've got time, and emotions are not quite so high. Important things can't always be said and done on the doorstep.

### Gospel Teaching

In our Gospel reading from John, we are witnesses to just such a goodbye. In fact all of chapters 13 to the end of 17 are a goodbye – they could be called “the long goodbye”, a good name for a film perhaps. Sandwiched between the raising of Lazarus – an echo of what's to come – and Jesus' betrayal and arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, these chapters are charged with the emotion of a painful but necessary farewell.

Jesus talks about what he has done, and what it all means – not always, it has to be said, with great clarity. Jesus knows that they will not have time to say goodbye later, so now he talks of how the disciples are to behave, of how they will be bound together into a community of love, and that this will give them their distinctive and attractive nature as the people of God. He tells them that things will not be easy without him, but that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit when he leaves.

And in chapter 17, Jesus rounds it all off with a prayer. And what a prayer it is! The first part of the prayer cements Jesus' credentials. It's not just a matter of being received by God in heaven. Jesus is returning home to the glory he had with God in the beginning (remember those famous opening words to John's Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God...”). Jesus

has told them before that he and the Father are one; now he again claims God's glory as his own.

Then he prays for his followers: those who have believed that he is the Son of God, and who very soon will find themselves the keepers and tellers of the message. Jesus' oneness with God is extended to the believers. Somehow, this little band of rather unpromising humanity has become bound up with God in Christ. From that point on there is an unshakeable bond between God and humankind – something wholly different about the way that human beings relate to God.

And then it all gets much simpler: a prayer for protection. Jesus must know that the hatred that he is about to experience will soon be extended to them. They haven't always been shining examples of steady faith; how will they cope without him?

Things move on, of course, and when the time comes really to say goodbye, everything is too chaotic, too dangerous, too tortured, to say any of these things. So, over supper, Jesus says his farewells. Perhaps the disciples understand, perhaps they don't, but at least they have had the chance to hear Jesus' goodbye, and store it up as treasure for the future.

## Application

And here we are, all these years on. Somehow, the emotion and urgency of the moment in the upper room are gone, and it's hard to imagine just what it felt like. We can but try to put ourselves in the sandals of the ones who were there; try and look into Jesus' eyes and hear his words afresh.

But that prayer still stands; still echoes across the centuries. A Palestinian peasant claims to be one with God, and something in the fabric of the universe shifts. Humankind and God are bound together when they were once set apart, and an unshakeable bond is formed that cannot be broken by human frailty and petty mistakes. Things are possible that were never possible before. Things will change that we never thought would change.

And how will it happen; how will we choose to be part of it? That's up to us, but we must always remember: whatever we do, Jesus' words of protection will ring in our ears.