

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Easter 7-B (16 May 2021)

High School Baccalaureate Sunday St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-05-15 Sat 11:03>

Collect

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19, Psalm 1

1 Ascension and Graduation

There are two events we mark today. One is on our “church” calendar, and one is on our “secular” calendar. One was handed down to us by our ancestors in the faith. The other is dictated by our local Board of Education. Today we recognize the Ascension of Jesus, bodily taken up into heaven right before the disciples’ eyes. Today we also anticipate the looming prospect of high school graduation for three of the young people in our midst: Ethan Ramos, Ian DiMatties, and Aviva Foster. As I considered the conjunction of these two observances this week, I was struck by the parallels. Jesus’ words of prayer over his disciples in John’s Gospel were meant to prepare them not only for his death, which would be undone by Resurrection a mere three days later, but also his Ascension, which would represent a deep change in how those disciples related to Jesus.

Similarly, high school graduation is a milestone in many young lives that reflects a time of profound change in relationships and responsibilities. So I’d like to consider for a few moments how the Ascension informs graduation, and maybe how graduation also informs our understanding of the Ascension.

2 I have made your name known...

Let’s start with this: ever since the Ascension, the gathered Church is where we encounter the presence of Christ. Indeed, St. Paul tells us, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”¹

From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus invited various disciples to follow him, to be with him, to learn from him, and to witness his power at work in the world. Likewise our children who are raised in church are being formed by the body of Christ, that is the church, so that they might be in Christ’s presence, to learn from him, and to witness his power at work in the world.

¹1 Cor 12.27 NRSV

Even when they were infants, the rhythms of the liturgy seeped into our children's bones as they fussed in the pews. From readings and sermons, to Children's Chapel, Sunday school and VBS, our children were nurtured with the stories of the Bible. Perhaps even more important than the stories of the Bible, however, we the church have taught our children how to love. We have taught them how to love in the way that God loves. Acts of *care and concern and cherishing* communicated to our children that *they* are loved, that there is a whole community of adults who see *them* as important, as *worthy* of ample investments of time, energy, and attention. We have given our children a vision of that which is good, excellent, and lovely. We have taught our children learned that the universe is a safe place and, despite occasional bouts of pain and doubt, that love is the theme of the over-arching narrative of reality. We have taught our children that God is love. They have experienced that love, witnessed it, lived it, learned about it, by being here, present, a part of the life of St. Thomas'.

Jesus said, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world."² Jesus did this for his disciples; Jesus does this even today for those who gather as his body. This has been Jesus' ministry to Ethan, Ian, and Aviva through us, through the church community we call St. Thomas'.

3 And now I am no longer in the world...

But something's changing, isn't it? Just as from the Day of Ascension onward, the apostles never again encountered Jesus in quite the same way they had in earlier days, so our children are no longer children. They are young adults preparing to go out into the world. They are quite possibly preparing to find themselves apart from us, St. Thomas'. But this day has been prepared for. Indeed, it was to prepare for this day that we have spent the last 18 or so years surrounding our children with loving care, instruction, and a growing breadth of experiences and responsibilities. That work of preparation was, for many of our children, begun and most clearly symbolized in their baptism.

I want to speak directly to Ethan, Ian, and Aviva right now. [No matter what your age or what your experience of life, this is the church's message of hope for you:] Your baptism is something that can never be taken away from you. It's something you can never quite escape. You are at liberty to ignore it: God is neither controlling nor manipulative. But your baptism is something that you will never lose, that will never be without effect. It will always be there waiting, something that you can come back to and rely upon when every other resource fails.

Your baptism ultimately represents God's love for you, God's acceptance of you, God's determination to fight on your behalf. Your church families at St. Thomas' and elsewhere have striven to give you a little glimpse of that love for you. That glimpse is a promise of God's more perfect, more powerful love. That glimpse is also a testament to your value, your worth, your own beauty that is so much more than skin deep.

Some of [our graduating seniors] *you* may go off on *your* own and get involved in another church right away. That can be a tremendous resource to *you* as you build a life of *your* own, more important than having a bank account, a car, or even a job. You will be received by that new parish not as your parents' child, but as your own adult self, with adult privileges and adult responsibilities. That can be an exciting experience.

²John 17.5-8 NRSV

Some of [our graduating seniors] *you* may remain close-by to Glassboro and may choose to navigate this transition into adult-hood in the company of St. Thomas'. Know that we are here for you and support you in your efforts. Please be patient with us as we get to know this new person, the adult you are becoming.

Some of [our graduating seniors] *you* may need a little time and space away from your church community in order to gain the perspective to see the purpose or the value of God and of Christ's church in your *own* life: that's fair enough. It's part of the process of growing up for very many of us. What's important is that *you* have been baptized, marked as Christ's own forever. Therefore whenever you are ready, you will find the body of Christ is waiting to embrace you as one of its own.

4 Sanctify them in the truth...

Our graduates are moving on to next things in their lives. Possible more education, probably more responsibility, and certainly more discovery of whom God has created them to be. It is, in many cases, only by leaving the orbits of their families and their families' parish that our graduates will discover the freedom to imagine the new thing God is doing in them. It is up to us to free them with encouragement, well-wishes, and continued support so that they can break free from our orbit and into the larger universe of God's gravitational pull.

And that's the thing that our graduates teach us in this moment. It takes tremendous faith, just a staggering amount of faith, to step out into the mysterious unknown all alone. Faith that God is there waiting to meet them and to lead them into bigger things than they have ever imagined before.

God has taught our children that faith by passing it through us, Christ's body.

We who remain behind have that same invitation of faith before us. Always we begin again, always we stand before the doorway into the bigger world that God has created. But if we, the body of Christ, remain a family of support for our graduates even as they move off into their own journeys, then we can know that that same body supports each of us in our journeys as well. As a parish, as families, and as individuals, God is calling us always to what's next, onward and upward, into the great adventure of life with God.

Amen.