

Column

It is the time of year that schools and colleges are sending out those who have completed their course of study to begin a new chapter in life. Commencement ceremonies are being held.

Often a person in government, a business leader or someone who has achieved success in another field is asked to address the graduating class. In what is sometimes called a valedictory, students are encouraged to celebrate their achievement as well as given advice and encouragement as they step into the future. Examples of 2025 speakers and their subjects include:

NBA star Carmelo Anthony spoke to graduates at Syracuse University of the importance of resilience in the face of unforeseen circumstances, while Wall Street Journal writer Jason Gay stressed to graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Madison the importance of authenticity. Meanwhile, President Donald J. Trump told those graduating the University of Alabama, “You’re not too young to accomplish great things.”

As far as we know, Jesus never addressed graduates at the “University of Jerusalem” or any other educational institution that might have been around in that day. He did, however, give what might be seen as valedictory to His disciples in the Upper Room on the eve of His crucifixion. John writes this address up in the 16th chapter of his Gospel. Here, Jesus offers encouragement as the disciples approach a new chapter in their life, namely one in which His physical presence would be withdrawn.

However, before offering encouragement, he speaks plainly of the challenges they will face. Life will not always be easy. Looking ahead to the period after the Ascension (Luke 24:50-51 and Acts 1:9-11), He tells them that people will misunderstand them and not always be kind: “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2).

Jesus' followers today still need to take to heart Jesus' plain speaking. Challenges continue to abound, both those directly related to following Jesus' way and those in common with all people.

There are some presentations of the Gospel in which these challenges are minimized or not mentioned at all: "Follow Jesus and all your troubles will be over." That is a false Gospel promise. Instead of a bed of ease, Jesus offers His followers a cross. Jesus never sugar coated His call to discipleship, and we shouldn't either.

But Jesus does not end His valedictory with a warning about the harsh realities of life. No, as Chapter 16 ends, He offers the disciples words of comfort and encouragement.

First, He speaks of prayer. Because of His coming and soon achievement on the cross, fellowship with the Father will become more

intimate. He commands them to ask in His name.

Asking in His name is more than appending each prayer with the words “in Jesus’ name.” It refers to understanding their new status in Him. He is the natural Son; they are sons and daughters by adoption. As such, the Father’s door is open to them day and night. “The Father himself loveth you,” He tells them.

Secondly, Jesus offers them His peace, a peace that transcends what is going on around them. Whatever comes, Jesus has overcome the world and His victory is their victory. Death itself is a conquered enemy.

Armed with these promises, they are sent out – or at least will be sent out on the day of Pentecost – to bear witness to Jesus and bring His purposes to bear in the world. We are likewise sent out. Jesus’ valedictory is for us.

May we hear and receive His words with joy and obedience.

O LORD, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Collect for the Fifth Sunday after Easter, Book of Common Prayer.

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