

Daily Mass Homily, May 27, 2020  
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His body had lost its strength. The cancer made him so weak that he could hardly sit up in the chair.

But Monsignor Kelly, my friend and mentor, gave me the privilege of one final visit.

He was tired. But with his soft voice, he said, "Priesthood is such a wonderful life – and I've had such a wonderful priesthood."

He said, "Pray for me, and I'll pray for you."

And the last word he spoke to me was simple. One word. He said, "Peace."

I cling to that last word – "peace" - on days when priesthood is busy, crazy, or confusing. That last word: "peace."

We treasure the last words that our loved ones speak. Those last words can summarize relationships, experiences, lifetimes.

Last words can even be humorous. At Hollywood Cemetery, there is a tombstone for a woman named Margaret Daniels. It reads: "She always said her feet were killing her. It turns out she was right."

Last words, from people we love. Do you have a memory of a last word spoken to you by someone whose love changed your life?

In today's first reading, the leaders of early Christian community at Ephesus had gathered together to hear the last words of someone who had changed their lives.

Remember: it was St. Paul who had labored several years in Ephesus to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and establish the community of believers. Then, Paul had moved on, proclaiming the Gospel wherever the Holy Spirit led him next.

Now, as we listen to today's First reading, Paul is making a journey on his way to Jerusalem. There, he will be arrested. And from there he will go to Rome, where he will die a martyr's death.

It is clear to all of the Ephesians that this will be the last time they get to see Paul or hear Paul's words directly from his own lips.

The emotion of this moment is overwhelming. They weep. They kneel to the ground. This is 'farewell.'

And what are the last words of Paul to these people he loved so much?

Paul reminds these leaders of the Ephesian church to stay faithful to their ministry. He reminds them that the church belongs to Christ – he saved every person in the church by his blood on the cross.

He reminds them to stay faithful to the truth that he taught them. He encourages them to stay rooted in the word, and to be generous in caring for others. 'It is better to give than to receive.'

Paul's last words?

*Be generous. Stay faithful to the Word. And remember that in the end, we all belong to Jesus, who died for us.*

Wouldn't Christians of every age be better disciples if we *focused* on these last words of Paul, and *lived* them?

In today's Gospel reading, we are also listening to some of the last words of Jesus. We are in John Chapter 17. Jesus is sitting at the table during the Last Supper. He will soon be arrested. This is the last time he will be able to speak with his disciples as a group. They are hearing his last words.

And what does he say? Well, actually, at one point he interrupts his conversation with his disciples, and Jesus just starts to pray out loud. They are hearing the dialog between the Son who is about to die, and the Father to whom he is returning.

Jesus prays that the Father will protect the disciples, shielding them by the power of his name. He prays that the Father will give us the gift of unity, just as the Father and Son are united in the Spirit. He prays that we will always be rooted in the truth, and experience the joy that comes from Christ.

The last words of Jesus in today's Gospel? *Protection. Unity. Truth. Joy.*

Wouldn't Christians of every age be better disciples if we *focused* on these last words of Jesus, and *lived* them?

Several decades ago, I attended a meeting at a church where I was serving. The pastor and I were meeting with a group of people who had been sending angry and horrible letters to the pastor. In my mind, these were the kind of people who know just enough religion to make them mean! I had lost patience with them.

But throughout this very difficult meeting, I was amazed at the way that the pastor spoke with this group of people. They shouted with anger – he responded with gentleness. They spoke with arrogance – he spoke with humility. They kept talking about the pastor – the pastor kept talking about Jesus.

After the meeting, I asked the pastor how he had been so kind, and patient and loving toward this gaggle of mean Catholics. And he said, “Well, this is how I prepared for this meeting. I imagined that tonight’s conversation would be the last conversation I ever had with these people. I imagined that, after this meeting, I would get into my car, but be killed on the way home in an accident.

“And I kept asking myself, ‘If these were the last words that these people ever heard from me, what would I want those last words to be?’ Would I want my last words to them to be words of anger, or defensiveness, or judgment? Or would I want my last words to them to be words of patience?”

Finally, he said, “If these were the last words they ever heard from me, I would want them to walk away having heard me speak *like* Jesus and speak *about* Jesus.”

I was amazed. I wish I could tell you that I have always followed his advice perfectly. But I don't. I'm human. But what a great goal to have each day! “Lord, let me speak with every person as if this is the last time I will say any words to them. And let me last words be words that are *like* you, and *about* you.”

Amen.