

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A (VIRTUAL) HOMILY 2020

THE SPIRIT of TRUTH and LOVE

Jn 14.15-21 Acts 8.5-17 1Pt 3.15-18

Welcome again, to all, now with some relaxation of the restrictions in force, but once again, not too quickly, as coronavirus is still with us, insidiously creeping around in the background. We need to continue to be sensible, maintaining physical distancing, careful hygiene, being generally cautious and attentive to wise and informed advice.

Much is now being said about returning to normal, with a catchword like ‘*snapback*’, and resuming education, economic activity, and so productivity. Yet, nothing will be the same after what we’re going through right now, not taking life for granted and presuming all is well, as long as you and I are feeling good about things. I can only imagine future generations are going to have to face the consequences of the devastating effects on our economy and that of the world, as the costs, and so the debts, mount up, necessarily so, in order to protect the vulnerable in our society and to maintain and sustain some sort of stability and continuity in families, life and work. In the midst of all this, I see the Gospel call to service in all its manifestations in our world today, as very much connected to our engagement in the real world, of which we are part. I say this, despite John’s Gospel dichotomies sometimes seeming to encourage detachment from the darkness of the world and the light of eternity out of this world!

As for our readings this weekend, we now come back into John’s long, long, long farewell discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper, where John’s focus is firstly on the washing of the feet, and the corresponding call to ongoing service, as Jesus offers reassurance at a very dark and doubtful time, in saying goodbye (“*God be with you*”!) to his friends, who are not at all convinced as to what is to come. There is an overshadowing ominous sense of fear and failure, formally addressed by Honest Thomas (*as I call him*), who steps forward to express the questions the others are thinking, but too afraid to ask. Today’s Gospel is Jesus’ reminder that in the absence of his physical presence, his spiritual presence endures, with his Spirit walking with those of faith in him and his message.

There is a sense in John’s Gospel that there is later to be division in the Christian community, and the reminder here is that Jesus calls for unity, as reflected in his relationship with God as Father and the Spirit who guides, such that there is a link between living the life of a disciple and the divine presence inherent in those who believe in him and live in his love. This obviously means a love that is to be active in the individual believer, the community, and the broader world, of which we are all part.

In these times of much ‘*fake truth*’, which, to my mind, refers to truth being made up in one’s own mind as to what one wants to think and which suits one’s own narrow mindedness,

subjectivity and prejudices, of which we currently see so much. In contrast, Jesus reminds us that he gives believers the spirit of objective Truth (*this not long before Pilate asks Jesus just 'What is truth?' during the kangaroo court trial of Jesus*), a truth that hope will prevail and his presence will continue through that spirit. The test is of love being lived as Jesus spoke, taught and practised. His commandments are never presented in terms of detailed legislation, but as the principles of love being real and active, the positive attitudes expressed in the Be-attitudes, in response to those encountered along the path of each person's life, and in the relationships existing and developing between the members of the communities to which they belong. These are not to be closed, insular groups, however, but open and welcoming to the broader world as well.

Last week, we had the account of the practical need for deacons to be appointed, in order to provide for the needy in the community, and today's account from life in the early Church in Acts of the Apostles clearly demonstrates the need for expansion and growth in diversity and acceptance, as Philip heads into the Samaritan town to preach the message of Jesus and then Peter and John ensue, in order to bestow the Spirit of truth, goodness and love, upon those who respond in faith, as many do.

Once again, I think of those in the front line of this crisis, caring for the sick, providing for our material and physical needs with essential services. On Tuesday this last week, 12th May (*the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth in 1820*), was International Nurses' Day, to mark the contributions that nurses make to society, largely in the background, with doctors generally getting the front-line publicity for medical care and research. Nightingale spoke of a call from God to the service of others, becoming a nurse against the will of her mother and criticism of her sister, and she followed that through for the rest of her life. Moreso than the medical practitioners of the time, she emphasized the need for better living conditions for the sick, improved sanitary practices, more attention to hygiene, and handwashing being a priority, some of the things of which we are being reminded at present! She was concerned about patients having clean air, being physically distanced from each other, and statistical and physical evidence, not just previous presumed customs, shaping medical practice.

Journalist and author Julia Baird writes this weekend of "*Respect for those who deserve it most*", in reference to nurses and their work. Of Nightingale, she states: "*She was so much more than the gentle 'lady of the lamp' stereotype... (She) was a fiercely determined, driven social reformer and statistician, who perfected working from home... (and) used pie charts to demonstrate to the government how British soldiers were 10 times more likely to be killed by disease than in battle.*"

Moving to the present moment, she comments: "*When you are vulnerable, intubated, lying prone with wires snaking from your body, desperately hoping for an end – or pause – to pain, you do appreciate their expertise in a way you may not have before... Nurses are crucial and too often underestimated.*" I take them as an example of those whom we should appreciate

and acknowledge in our current crisis for their dedication and self-sacrifice in the front line. So, let's hear it for the nurses! Of course, this is not to deny the expertise, commitment and work of doctors and other medical staff and carers, whose involvement is also critically important.

And so to conclude, the Spirit of God continues to pervade our wonderful and beautiful, but troubled world, and it is for you and me to demonstrate the Spirit's presence in the way we respond in truth, goodness and love. The fruits of the Spirit are real, and to be reflected in each of us.

May we continue to stay safe, sane and as healthy and sensible as possible.

john hannon

17th May 2020
