

Some words for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

*'May your love be upon us, O Lord,
as we place all our hope in you.'*¹



Readings:

Acts 6:1-7

1 Peter 2:4-9

Psalm 32:1-2, 4-5, 18-19. R.v.22

John 14:1-12

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

The picture above, imagining Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper, depicts the scene after the fellowship had been broken and Judas had departed out into the darkness of the night. Beginning what is known as his *Farewell Discourse*, Jesus tells the eleven remaining disciples, *'My little children, I shall not be with you much longer.'*² It is with some urgency then that the Lord immediately gives them a new commandment, *'love one; just as I have loved you,'*³ and foretells Peter's impending betrayal. Almost certainly sensing their bewilderment and the turbulent roil of emotion at being confronted by the disclosure of departure and betrayals, Jesus now sought to reassure his remaining disciples, *'Do not let your hearts be troubled.'*⁴ It is

important to note that Jesus does not promise his disciples an untroubled life. In fact he had long made it clear to them that to follow him would lead at times to conflict or difficulty. However, at their core, in their hearts, they need not be troubled, *'Trust in God still, and trust in me.'*⁵

What is offered to still the anxious heart? Jesus holds out the promise of future reunion; of a place to stay, of life together again in the *'Father's house.'*⁶ Furthermore, it is instructive to understand that this is not happenstance, it is planned; *'I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared ... I shall return.'*⁶ The Lord may well be about to be dragged out of the garden of Gethsemane and eventually led to the Cross but he is not going unwillingly. It is by virtue of his initiative, according to the path that he has chosen, that we come to discover, *'that where I am you may be too.'*⁷

The final words of our loved ones long linger in our hearts and the farewell words of Jesus were, and still are, treasured and pondered on by his disciples. Thomas was the first but by no means the last to wonder, in his case aloud, *'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'*⁸ Follow my Way, says Jesus, and you will come to the Truth, for *'no one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven.'*⁹ In reaching this Truth we begin to share in the Life that the Father has revealed to us, for Jesus *'is the Father's one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other word than this one.'*¹⁰ So it is then that the Lord can say, *'No one can come to the Father except through me.'*¹¹

In reflecting on this revelation Pope St John Paul II, when speaking of the permanent validity of the Church's Mission, wrote, *'The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. ... [M]any people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. ... For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but ... This grace comes from Christ; ... Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.'*¹²

This Mission of the Church on earth is on-going, it is still marvelling and pondering the words of the Saviour, for *'even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries.'*¹³ It is not just Philip who has been unable to fully grasp the

meaning of Jesus, the sacrament of the encounter with God; many of us remain dissatisfied unless we can see *'the Father'*¹⁴ for ourselves.

Our national response to the pandemic we are currently suffering is, we keep being told, being *'guided by the science.'* Science though is not a static, monolithic body of knowledge upon which we can all agree and draw. On the contrary, as can be clearly seen, it is always in flux; gaining comprehension here and discarding other notions there. Differing scientists hold different scientific opinions. Scientific understanding grows by systematically studying the physical and natural world through observation and experiment; by advancing a hypothesis and testing it. If this sounds familiar then that it is because it should.

In the Christian tradition the Word of God is revealed to humanity in the physical world of signs and symbols, of words and gestures, *'by deeds and words which are intrinsically bound up with each other.'*¹⁵ Jesus formed his disciples by first inviting them to listen and see so that by observing him along the way they had the opportunity to grow in understanding. He encouraged them to experiment also, *'he appointed seventy-two others and sent them out ahead of him, in pairs.'*¹⁶ Before his leaving, the Lord had given his followers words and his Spirit with which to pray, water by which his Body might grow and the physical, tangible means for us to be nourished, forgiven and healed.

The old adage has it that *'faith is caught, not taught.'* Our faith can be *'caught'* precisely because the act of Christian charity is tactile and physically expressed. It permits observation. However, it can also be taught too for it is precisely by being loved that we first learn what love is; we experiment and push the boundaries to discover the shape and size of love. It is why we received a new commandment and must now love one another as God has loved us. In our Christian love we meet Christ and to meet Christ is to come to the Father. St John's own journey to faith is expressed in his gospel. At its beginning we are told *'No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him know.'*¹⁷ Yet by the time we come upon the end we read the final words of Jesus to Thomas, *'You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe.'*¹⁸ What Thomas saw is what is revealed in today's gospel, *'To have seen me is to have seen the Father.'*¹⁹ The love of God is made visible in Jesus Christ, *'believe it on the evidence of this work, if for no other reason.'*²⁰

This presence of God in flesh must surely explain why we can dare to believe Jesus when he tells his disciples that they will perform not only the *'same works [but] even*

*greater works also.*²¹ By virtue of his return to the Father human flesh is glorified and the Spirit of the Triune God is at play, renewing *'the face of the earth.'*²² Restored and reoriented by the death and resurrection of the Lord, the human heart can once again aspire to 'greater' works: the knowledge and love of God in Christ Jesus and its perfect fulfilment through love of neighbour. God is love and the proper work of the disciple is also love. To love is to be at one with God; the Saints through the centuries stand as eloquent testimony to this.

There are many clamouring voices and competing claims in our world at present and it is definitely true to say that, for the majority at least, Theology is no longer held to be the Queen of the Sciences. Nevertheless, the study of God's Word and revelation in his creation continues to serve our world. Our belief in a Creator, in a God who loves us and desires to share life with us, can offer not only an account of all human relationships, societies and cultures that continues to challenge us but also one that is radically at odds with current notions of status and position, wealth and well-being, power and force.

The Lord Jesus reveals to us that our true peace and joy lie in our communion with God and thereby with each other. In this belief we can indeed face the world and all its challenges untroubled, for *'after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too.'*²³

*'O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect!
O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
Jesus, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest;
who are, with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest.'*²⁴

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

10 May 2020

The photograph is a picture of *Christ's Farewell to the Eleven*, by Duccio di Buoninsegna, from the *Maesta* altarpiece, Siena Cathedral, 1308–1311.

1. *Psalm* 32:22

2. *John* 13:33

3. *John* 13:34
4. *John* 14:1
5. *Ibid.*
6. *John* 14:2
7. *John* 14:3
8. *John* 14:5
9. *John* 3:13
10. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 65
11. *John* 14:6
12. *Redemptoris Missio*, 10, Encyclical Letter, Pope St John Paul II, 7 December, 1990
13. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 66
14. *John* 14:8
15. *Dei Verbum*, 2, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican II, 1965
16. *Luke* 10:1
17. *John* 1:18
18. *John* 20:29
19. *John* 14:9
20. *John* 14:11
21. *John* 14:12
22. *Psalms* 103:30
23. *John* 14:3
24. *Jerusalem the golden*, verse 4, from *De Contemptu Mundi*, c.1140, Bernard of Cluny;
trans. J. M. Neale