

Some words for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

*'Grant, almighty God,
that we may celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy,
which we keep in honour of the risen Lord,
and that what we relive in remembrance we may always hold to in what we do.'*¹



Readings:

Acts 8:5-8. 14-17

Psalm 65:1-7. 16. 20. R.v.1

1 Peter 3:15-18

John 14:15-21

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

When *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published in the summer of nineteen ninety-seven, no one, including its unknown author J. K. Rowling, could have had any sense of the astonishing success it and the succeeding novels would go on to achieve and the global cultural phenomena that would be created. Although the seventh and final novel was published thirteen years ago, last December's General Election saw many journalists and political commentators speaking and writing about the 'Harry Potter generation' and the social and political influence of Rowling's work upon younger members of the electorate.

The Potter books explore many classic themes of children's literature but they also reveal the over-riding experience of the author herself. Confronted by the death of her mother, the author poured her grief into the literary world that she created. Setting the magic and whimsy aside, at its heart the reader is invited to accompany an eleven-year-old orphan through adolescence. Wretched, forced to live under the stairs in an unloving home, Harry will go on to mature in a magical boarding school as he discovers both the experience and meaning of love. Yes, as he grows older, the boy will discover romantic love but, from the beginning of the work, the love that most permeates and informs Harry during his time at Hogwarts School is sacrificial love; a love that speaks of obligation, of duty and responsibility to those we love. It is not magic but love that is the greatest power in the books; love gave Harry life and it is love that will protect his friends. When confronted by his enemy, who is undoubtedly the greater magician, Harry, who possesses the greater heart, nonetheless feels sorry for him because he will never know love or friendship; the Dark Lord is alone.

Even though he is preparing to depart, Jesus, as he continues his *Farewell Discourse* in today's gospel, will reassure his disciples that he will not leave them 'orphans.'² They need not be alone or feel powerless because, 'the Father ... will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever.'³ Such is the nature of his love that, as Son, he can promise the love of the Father and pledge, 'I will come back to you,'⁴ while asserting to each one, 'I shall love him and show myself to him.'⁵

To render the words of Jesus accessible to his Greek-speaking listeners St John used the Greek word *Parakletos*, which we sometimes see transliterated as *Paraclete*. The ancient Greeks used the term to refer to a lawyer who would bring your petition before a court or to a witness, someone who was willing to testify for you. The Romans used the term *Advocatus* from which we derive our word *advocate* to mean the same thing. In either case the word literally means, 'I call ... to my side, to help.' Within the sense and usage of the word we also find the idea of someone who gives *counsel*, is willing to *mediate*, will offer *comfort* or advice, act as an *intercessor* or aid and *defend* one in time of danger.

It is important not to forget that in speaking of 'another Advocate'⁶ Jesus reveals that he too is a *Parakletos*. Having dwelt among us in flesh⁷ and lived subject to human nature, whereby he could only visit a person or location at a particular time and place, the moment has now come for him to be lifted up⁸ and glorified.⁹ By his Paschal death, resurrection, and ascension the new *Parakletos* will be unleashed across the face of the earth¹⁰ and will visit each and every disciples in any and every

place and be with them forever. However, even when he does return to the heavenly kingdom we will still also *'have our advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, who is just.'*¹¹

The Advocate, a person not a thing note, and therefore capable of love, is *'to be with you for ever.'*¹² The Spirit of truth, whom the world of pride and falsehood cannot know or receive, will abide permanently, not temporarily. In the Old Testament the spirit descended and then departed. Now the Advocate will remain, an on-going presence, deep and abiding day after day, and we will *'know him, because he is with you, he is in you.'*¹³ God will dwell in the heart.

If I declare that I love, then the logic of my love is that I obey what my heart desires. I need, feel compelled indeed, to draw closer to the object of my love. In thinking about the nature of love, St Thomas Aquinas discerned that its purpose is to seek, to will, the good of the other. Now, we clearly cannot will the good of God, for God is already perfectly good, but we can choose to seek the good of that which God loves; that is to say, our neighbour. *'If you love me you will keep my commandments,'*¹⁴ the Lord had declared, *'Love one another; just as I have loved you.'*¹⁵ This loving what God loves is essential because, although the world will no longer see the Lord, the disciples *'will see me, because I live and you will live.'*¹⁶ The heart of Jesus cannot leave the disciples orphaned; his love for them means he must return. *'On that day'* therefore, the disciples *'will understand that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.'*¹⁷ In other words, they may finally recognise with the eyes of faith, the undying love of God made visible in Jesus and, possessing that same love in their own hearts, now come to realise that God dwells in them and they in God. The same is true for us also.

*'Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me; and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father,'*¹⁸ Jesus tells the disciples. It is true that the love of God is freely offered to all, but nevertheless the Father requires that we demonstrate our Christian love in two ways. Firstly, through obedience, by following what we have heard and loving as Jesus has told us to, and secondly, though in effect it is really the same thing, by loving Jesus, the Son. *'It is not those who say to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven.'*¹⁹

Our church buildings have been constructed so that we can come together, as a community of life and love, to give worship to God and *'so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ.'*²⁰ It is not just public worship but myriad opportunities for public love and witness that is also denied to

us at this present time. To love one's neighbour is essential to the Christian life and our present challenge is to look for ways whereby we may continue to fulfil the Lord's command. Charity begins at home we are told and all of us can surely strive to appreciate and more perfectly cherish our families? We can still donate to charitable organisations and reach out appropriately to our near-neighbours.

Unlike the young Harry Potter we have no magic wand that we can wave and thereby alter things to our liking. However, when faced with peril, it is his friends that are essential to Harry's progress and the lesson that he continually needs to learn is to trust, as his Headmaster tells him, that '*help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.*'²¹ We too must trust and continue to do what so many others do not do and that is to pray and give praise to God as his body here on earth. In our second reading today St Peter asks us to, '*Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.*'²² The reciprocity of love, first ventured by God's covenant with his people Israel in the desert, is now perfected by the Son through the Holy Spirit, and a community of life and love is established between the three persons of the Trinity, one God, and the individual human person.

*'And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the power of human telling, for none can guess its grace,
till he become the place wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.'*²³

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

17 May 2020

The picture is of *Dernier Sermon de Notre-Seigneur* (The Last Sermon of Our Lord)
Jacques-Joseph Tissot, 1836-1902, Brooklyn Museum, New York

1. *Collect*, Proper for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, *Roman Missal*
2. *John* 14:18
3. *John* 14:16
4. *John* 14:18
5. *John* 14:21
6. *John* 14:16

7. *John* 1:14
8. *John* 3:13
9. *John* 12:23
10. *Psalms* 103:30
11. I *John* 2:1
12. *John* 14:16
13. *John* 14:17
14. *John* 14:15
15. *John* 13:34
16. *John* 14:19
17. *John* 14:20
18. *John* 14:21
19. *Matthew* 7:21
20. *Ephesians* 4:12
21. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, chapter 14, 1998, Bloomsbury, London
22. I *Peter* 3:15
23. *Come down, O love divine*, verse 4, Bianco da Siena, (d.1434), trans. R. F. Littledale