

Homily: Seventh Sunday of Easter 2021

Yesterday I called in to see our first Communion children during their preparation session. I hadn't planned it, but we got talking about how, after their first Communion, some of them may wish to become altar servers. It reminded me of how I became a server some 35 years ago. My mum wasn't convinced it was a good idea – I was far too naughty in church for me to up there in front of everyone! One day, our Parish Priest, Canon Boyle, pulled up in his car as we walked down the street. He wound down the window and asked my mum: "Mrs Allman, when is your boy going to start serving on the altar?" I think, before she really had chance to respond, he said, "Bring him on Wednesday evening at quarter to seven!" And so it was.

Actually, I apparently became much better behaved when I was on the sanctuary. Perhaps it was because I was kept busy! But perhaps, too, there was something about being drawn out of the crowd, set apart for a particular service, that made me see more clearly what was happening at Mass. Sometimes we need to be set apart, not simply to be in among the crowd. And in some sense, this is precisely what Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel: His followers are to be "consecrated", set apart in His service. In the Lord's words, this does not mean that we are removed from the world, but that we recognise that we do not truly belong to the world. Our real life is the life of heaven: that is where we really belong.

To live as someone consecrated by God, to live as someone who doesn't belong to the world, is not always easy. It means not guided by the spirit of this world – in other words, not seeking our own ambition, status, power, wealth or other passing pleasures. It means orientating our lives around God, trying to put Him first, because in the end, only He can grant us the life and the happiness we truly desire. Today's Gospel is perhaps not the easiest to understand, but actually it's truly beautiful, because it is a prayer of Jesus for all of us. Here is Jesus, speaking to His Father, with us in His mind and heart. And here's what He prays for: that we may stay true to His name – in other words, to persevere in faith; that we may be one, held in that same unity which is at the heart of God Himself; that we may be protected from the evil one; that we may be consecrated in truth. And He also expresses His desire for us: He wants to share His joy with us to the full.

To be consecrated in truth means to be set apart to know God and to try to live by His law of love. Not everyone in the world has the gift of faith that we have received – it's something we can be so grateful for. By our baptism we were consecrated, set apart to live for God, set apart to live in union with Jesus, staying true to God. Jesus today says that He consecrates Himself – He is speaking of His death and resurrection – so that we may be consecrated too. And surely in these words we also hear a pointer to the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are consecrated to become Jesus' Body and Blood. These ordinary things are set apart, made holy by the sacrifice of Jesus, re-presented at the altar. And through them, we too are consecrated, set apart, made holy for God. His consecration, made by His going to the cross, is shared with us in baptism and in the Eucharist: He makes us holy.

My being 'set apart' as an altar server stopped me messing about at Mass and wasting the time I spent in church. I have no doubt that it helped to open my eyes to what was really happening at the altar. Perhaps the same is true of life more generally. Being 'set apart', consecrated to God, opens our eyes to truths we wouldn't otherwise see. It stops us from wasting the time we are given on this earth, but helps us to live in truth and joy, as Jesus desires. He helps us to remain in the world, without following all the ways of the world, the dead ends and the false promises the world sometimes offers. The Lord truly wants to give us so much more. Jesus has prayed that we may be ready to receive His gifts, to live as His people. He has prayed that we may know ourselves as those who live in the world, but truly belong to Him.

Fr Andrew

