

## Homily: Sixth Sunday of Easter, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020

A couple of days ago, James and I were talking about the coming weekend, and I remarked that I hadn't yet got any ideas for a homily. He asked me what the readings were; when I told him, quick as a flash, he said: "Jesus says, 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.' Maybe in this time people feel He has left us, but actually He comes back to us in new ways." I thought it was very insightful. It also got me thinking: Imagine if Jesus really did leave us. Imagine if we did not have Him, if we did not have our faith, especially at this time. Imagine what a hole, what a gap, it would leave in our lives.

I think in these days we're all learning to value things that sometimes we have taken for granted – the presence of our loved ones, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the simple freedoms we enjoy, the relative certainty and predictability of so much of our lives. And, of course, our faith. It matters. It not only sustains us through difficult times; it is actually the bedrock on which our lives are built. Without our faith, without the Lord, we would indeed be orphans, lost in the world.

In the first reading we hear of people coming to faith. Philip goes to a Samaritan town and proclaims Christ to them. We are told that they united in welcoming the message with joy. Faith is a gift to be received, something which gives life and joy. And one of the reasons it gives joy is because it offers hope. Faith is the seed of hope.

In today's second reading, St Peter tells us to always be ready to share with others the reason for the hope we have. The reason for our hope is very simple: Easter. These fifty days remind us why we have hope: because Jesus has risen from the dead. He has conquered death and risen to a new and glorious life, and He shares this with us. On Easter Sunday in the Sequence we heard the words, "Christ, my hope, is risen." Christ is our hope. His resurrection is our hope. Easter is our hope.

Supposing someone met you and asked you – from a safe distance, of course – why you were so upbeat despite all the challenges we face at present. We could say, "Well, I'm confident that the scientists will get on top of this. There'll be a vaccine or treatment sooner rather than later. I can see an end to all this." It's a perfectly good answer, but it's not hope: it's optimism. We are looking at the situation and seeing how it can resolve, and we can be optimistic. But hope is stronger: hope can say, "Well, at present I don't see how this will resolve, but I do know that everything is in God's hands. Jesus has conquered death – ultimately nothing can harm us." Hope, then, is not founded on reading the signs around us and working out our chances. It comes from placing everything in God's hands – it comes from faith, perfect trust that He only allows what is best for our eternal salvation. Optimism can fade very quickly if circumstances change, but hope is not founded on the future or the present situation – it is founded on something in the past, something which has already happened in human history – the resurrection of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of hope as a firm anchor – in the storms of life, nothing can shake our hope, because it comes from our faith in the risen Lord.

The Gospel brings us to the third and final theological virtue: love. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” says the Lord Jesus. This causes me some alarm! I know that I love Jesus, but I also know that I don’t always keep His commandments – I don’t always show my love for the Lord or for others as well as I should. But the Lord insists: “Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be the one who loves me.” When you stop and think about it, it stands to reason: we cannot love Jesus without loving what He loves. He commands love; He *is* love incarnate. If we love Him, we love love, so to speak, and therefore we want to carry out His commandment of love. And attached to this is a great promise: “Anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love Him and show myself to Him.” We cannot see or know Jesus unless we make space for love in our lives. Only when our hearts are open to love can we truly see Him and know Him. If we have no space for love, we have no space for the Lord, who is love.

St Paul teaches that ultimately there are three things which last: faith, hope and love. They are present in our readings today, and they are inseparably linked. Without faith, I cannot have hope – optimism, sometimes, certainly – but not hope. But if I have faith, I can never be without hope, and if I have hope, I am free to love. Hope frees the heart, allowing us to ride the ups and downs of life which could otherwise make us retreat into selfishness when life gets tough. Hope tells us that there is a future, and a future filled with joy. And because we know this, we are made free to give of ourselves, living with greater generosity and – most importantly – with greater love.

It’s true that there can be times when we feel lost in the world, but – as the Lord reminds us today – we are not orphans. We are children of love – the love of God, which conceived us and holds us in being. We are children of hope, because we receive new life, freedom and joy by living with the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. We are children of faith, because by faith we have come to new birth in water and the Holy Spirit – the sacrament of baptism – which is a dying to old ways and rising to new life with Christ. Imagine living life without faith, hope or love – we really would feel so lost, we would be orphans. Now, more than ever, let’s thank God for these gifts!

Today we hear the Lord promising us a new Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. In the season of Easter we celebrate the Lord’s resurrection, and we also celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift bestowed on His Church by the risen Lord. On Friday we begin a novena to the Holy Spirit, asking for a renewal of the Spirit’s gifts in our lives. St Paul teaches us that the Spirit teaches us to cry out to God, “Abba, Father” – we have a Father, we are His children. The Lord does not leave us as orphans. Let’s live, then, as children of God, keeping the Lord’s commandments not as a duty, but because we love Him, and we love the things He loves. Let’s live as He asks us: lives built on faith, animated by hope and overflowing with love of God and neighbour. Then we shall truly know Him.

Fr Andrew

