

Homily: Seventh Sunday of Easter, 24th May 2020

Since our churches – and pretty much everything else – closed in March, I've been really struck how many times we have heard at Mass stories of people confined in their houses, or sometimes even in a single room. We heard of the Israelites on lockdown in their homes in Egypt on the night of the Passover; of the Lord and His disciples in the confinement of the upper room at the Last Supper; of the apostles on Easter Day and again the following Sunday locked in a room, fearing for their lives, when the risen Lord came in and spoke to them, greeting them with a message of peace. And today we are given one final image in this sequence: the Apostles, together with Our Lady and the holy women, gathered in one place in the days after the Lord's Ascension into heaven.

But this gathering, unlike some of the earlier ones, is not a gathering of fear so much as expectation. At the Ascension the Lord Jesus promised, "Not many days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit," and, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." Strengthened by His promise, they gathered "in continuous prayer", in this way preparing their hearts for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which they would receive at Pentecost. In these days each year between the Ascension and Pentecost, we too are invited to commit ourselves to deeper prayer, asking for a renewal of the Holy Spirit's gifts in our own lives.

In a few moments, when we say the Creed, we'll profess that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. Life is God's first gift to us, and it is the Spirit who breathes life into God's creation. The book of Genesis describes how, as God created the world, His Spirit "hovered over the waters"; the Spirit was there, ready to give life, active in that moment of creation. And God saw that His work was good. Today it's five years since the Holy Father gave us the document *Laudato si'*, the encyclical in which he reminds us that creation is God's gift and that all of us are called, out of love for others and gratitude to the Lord, to do what we can to preserve and care for our common home. Despite being locked in the house most of the time these last few weeks, I think the slightly slower pace of life has enabled me to notice more of the gift of creation: the wind rustling through the trees these last couple of days, the birdsong which is so often audible in the background as we celebrate Mass, even a squirrel I saw the other day running across the piazza at the front of the narthex and playing in the grounds. These are all gifts from the Lord, who wants us to delight in His creation, just as He does.

But the Holy Spirit's work did not stop when the Lord breathed life into our world. The Spirit continues to give life, a life which goes beyond what our senses reveal. In our Cathedral in Lancaster there is a stained glass window just outside the baptistery. It shows the baptismal font, and above it, a dove in flight. God's Spirit, once again, hovers over the waters – the waters of baptism – ready to give life. This is the new birth in water and the Holy Spirit described by our Lord in St John's Gospel. In baptism we are called to a new and glorious life, a spiritual life, a life of faith which is not confined to a few decades on this earth, but is eternal. Baptism is the beginning of eternal life; it is also our adoption as

children of God, when we are first able to call God our Father, and know ourselves as His children.

These two things go hand in hand: to be in relationship with God and to have eternal life. And it's not simply that being close to God leads to eternal life; Jesus today says something much stronger than that: being close to God *is* eternal life. Listen to His words: "And eternal life is this: to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

These are astonishing words. To know God, to know Jesus, is eternal life. If we know Him, we already have – we already *live* – eternal life. To know God – this is life. Real life. The Lord doesn't teach us to know *about* God, but simply to know Him. It's easy to learn facts about God: He is eternal, He is infinite, He created everything, He is a Trinity of three Persons in one God, and so on... but to know Him is to enter into relationship with Him, into communion with Him – and this is life. Real, eternal life. It is not a gift of the future, but a gift already accessible in the here and now. It's true that on earth we stumble along with our imperfect faith and incomplete knowledge of the Lord, but as much as we know Him, we have life. Already, by entering relationship with God, we begin to experience eternal life.

This too is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Throughout Scripture, the Spirit inspired the sacred authors to make God known. The Spirit calls us to faith; the Spirit helps us to understand what we read. The Spirit witnesses in our hearts to the truth of Jesus and His resurrection. The Spirit makes Jesus present to us in the sacraments, so that we can encounter Him and know Him even more deeply. The Spirit plants in our hearts the desire to know and love God more deeply. At the Visitation, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and John the Baptist – still a baby in her womb – was also filled with this same Spirit; she gave a cry of joy and the baby leapt with joy in her womb. The Spirit taught them that Christ was close. Through the Spirit they knew Him, and they were filled with joy, with renewed life.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. The Creed is not just a statement of fact that we rattle off on a Sunday morning, but an expression of relationship. "*I believe in God*" means "*I trust in God*"; therefore I must know God. I can't trust someone, I can't believe in someone, if I don't know them. The Spirit who breathed life into us at creation is the same Spirit who makes God known today, and so gives eternal life to us. All of the Spirit's work is life-giving: at creation, He gave biological life; now, He offers eternal life through our rebirth as sons and daughters of God, His children who know Him and therefore have eternal life. Three weeks ago in the Gospel we heard Jesus announce: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." The fulfilment of His mission is close: the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, will be bestowed upon His Church, so that God's people may know Him, and, knowing Him, may already begin to have the fulness of eternal life.

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