

Homily: Fifth Sunday of Easter, 10th May 2020

I'm reminded today of a little boy in school – he would only have been five or six at the time – who once asked me, “Do you have a butler?” “Why would I have a butler?” I asked in reply. “Because you live in a mansion,” he told me. Out of the mouths of babes! I'm not sure it's quite a mansion, but like most presbyteries, it is a large house. Knowing how difficult I sometimes find the lockdown, it makes me all the more aware of the sufferings of people who live in much more confined dwellings.

Today we hear of a dwelling that is anything but confined: the mansion, we could say, which is the Father's house. “There are many rooms in my Father's house”, Jesus tells us in the Gospel today. What are these “many rooms”? Today I'd like to suggest three ways to receive these encouraging words of our Lord.

Firstly, let's notice that the Father's house is not a place of confinement – it is a place to explore. I did my training for the priesthood at Ushaw, a vast college just outside Durham. It had something like 200 bedrooms, as well as many chapels, a theatre, common rooms, a swimming pool, games room, derelict dormitories, an old infirmary, a disused convent and more. I spent lots of free time in the first few months just exploring this vast place, and finding new corners and new points of interest. The same can be true of our spiritual lives. As we pray, we explore the many rooms of the Father's house, we become more familiar with His dwelling, with His presence. We enter more deeply in prayer, coming to know God as we make the journey of our spiritual lives, through what St Teresa of Avila, the great Carmelite teacher of prayer, calls ‘The Interior Castle’. Passing through the many rooms of prayer, we draw closer to Christ, who dwells at the very centre. So we can ask ourselves: am I still exploring the Father's house? Am I entering more deeply to the place where God dwells? Am I drawing closer to Him? In the spiritual life, there are many rooms to explore.

Secondly, these rooms in the Father's house also point to God's dwelling on earth. Every church building is effectively a room in the Father's house, a place where He makes His home on earth. I'm sure that many of you have had the experience, as I often have, of going into a church anywhere in the world, even one I have never seen before, and feeling that is home from home, regardless of the style of building, its age or condition or anything else. Simply to enter a church and know that Christ is there makes it home for us – it is a room in the Father's house, and we, as members of His family, belong there. That's one of the reasons it's so painful that we can't open the doors of the church at present. But that also encourages to look a little more deeply, to take a step further in our understanding.

St Peter teaches us today that we are living stones making a spiritual house, a dwelling for the Lord. We are a chosen people, he tells us, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God, who called us out of darkness into His own wonderful light. We were chosen, consecrated, set apart, called from darkness to light, at the moment of our baptism. And in that sacrament, we also became temples of the Holy Spirit, places in which God dwells; rooms, so to speak, in the Father's house. Our hearts must be rooms in the Father's house – rooms with space for God and for others. This is the call of every Christian.

As you participate in the Mass via the internet, the Word of God is proclaimed in your home. Christ is made visible in your home. Your home, too, becomes a room in the Father's house, a place where God is present. And because we are aware that ours is not the only room in the Father's house – there are many rooms – we are lifted from our isolation; our minds and hearts are raised to think of God, of those with Him in heaven – the saints and angels, our loved ones who have gone before us; and to think also of all those who live as members of God's family here on earth. At every Mass the whole Church, in heaven and on earth is present – each of us, every dwelling of God, every church – together, making up the house of God, the place where He and His family live. Through faith, every room in the Father's house is made visible whenever the Mass is celebrated.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, when Jesus speaks of the Father's house, He refers to our heavenly home. There are many rooms there, too: salvation is offered to all who will receive it.

During the last week we've made the first active preparations for the day when we can reopen our church for private prayer. Please don't get too excited – I don't know how soon this will be, but we want to be ready to open the doors as soon as possible. I know, because you tell me, that many of you are yearning for the day when you can simply come and spend a little quiet time before the Lord, present in the Blessed Sacrament. I know you long to come and pay a visit to this room in the Father's house. I imagine, then, that it is quite a consoling thought to think that someone is working to prepare the church for you to come back – in a sense, preparing your place in the Father's house. How much more consoling, how much more wonderful, though, to consider this: that right now, even as you watch and listen, there is One who is preparing my place, your place, in the eternal house of God which is heaven! This is exactly what the Lord Jesus says to us in the Gospel today: "I go to prepare a place for you." That is why He died, why He rose from the dead, why He ascended to heaven. To prepare a place for you, for me.

Isn't it wonderful? Jesus is preparing your place in the Father's house, in eternal happiness! And this is not just some distant work: He works within you. He prepares your place by making your heart a dwelling for God on earth. Perhaps it would be a good thing for us in our spiritual lives to ask ourselves this question each day: What is Jesus doing in my life today to prepare my place in heaven? How can I see Him working within me? He is working; He is preparing your place – when we reflect on this, we become more conscious of how close He is to us, how active He is in our lives, here and now. So let's hear with confidence the words that Jesus speaks to us today: "Do not let your hearts be troubled; trust in God still, and trust in me." They are words for this moment, and for every time of uncertainty.

Out of the mouths of babes... that little boy was quite right. I do live in a mansion – but not one of bricks and mortar. A mansion which is the communion of saints, with many rooms spanning heaven and earth; a dwelling place of God, which is in heaven, in the tabernacles of our churches, but also in every heart which will receive Him with love.

Fr Andrew

