

## Fr James' homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter 2020

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 8:5-8, 14-17

Second Reading: First Letter of St Peter 3:15-18

Gospel: John 14: 15-21

The Gospel this Sunday pretty much carries on from where we left off last Sunday. Jesus, at the Last Supper, talks at length about the inner life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the power of their love. He talks on so much that the Gospels for the last three Sundays of Easter in all three years of the cycle come from this discourse. Jesus has a lot to say and preachers sometimes complain that with so much on the same subject (the coming power of God the Holy Spirit) they run out of things to preach about! I think they miss the point. What strikes me straight away is that, just as Jesus gives us such a privileged insight into the divine life, so he shows us his complete humanity in that he seems to stumble over his words, struggling to express the awesome mystery with human speech. Less, they say, is more, but this Gospel is very much from the “And another thing...” school! So, reflect that in this Gospel we see the Incarnation: Jesus truly God and truly human.

But clearly what Jesus is passionate to convey to the disciples is of vital importance. So, let us learn again from St Peter, who, having been there, teaches us in the second reading what he has learned from his Lord: **“Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts...”** Well - no argument there! He goes on: **“always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.”** Now, let's face it, we are not good at this, pretty much any of us, and I speak for myself.

Standing up to the world and saying why Jesus is Lord is something we fail in as the Church, and is the problem of our times. Even our bishops fail at this. I have on my VCR recordings from the papal visit ten years ago which make me cringe as our bishops fail to give an account of their hope, before the onslaught of hostile commentators and journalists. So, as Bishop Barron has said, this text of St Peter is today “the master text for us.” We must be certain who Jesus is and what he invites us to in his risen life. And we need to keep renewing our certainty, or else it goes out of focus.

Jesus had asked Peter: *“Who do people say that I am?”* He asks because the answer matters. It is distinctive to our faith to be interested in doctrine. Not for us the philosophy that “it doesn’t matter what you believe so long as you are a good person.” Doing good and being good are important, but it is not enough for us to say we like Jesus because he did good and taught good stuff. Getting who Jesus is changes, or perhaps better, transforms everything in us. To say that in Jesus God became human to invite us into the life of God (which is what the Gospel is trying to describe) is doctrine, or dogma, and is so much more. It is the start of what Jesus calls in the

Gospel today “keeping my commandments” - that is, goodness to the “nth” degree. Goodness on steroids. The strange and mysterious path of sacrificial love that only bears fruit in him.

As I have commented before in this time of crisis, we see little glimpses of that love on display in how front liners and others behave right now. What is the irrational instinct that makes someone put themselves in harm’s way? They need to know that in the end their instinct only makes sense as the love of God shown to us in Jesus.

This is why the enemies of faith and the “new atheists” attack Catholic doctrine. Philip Pullman for example deliberately uses the words “dogma” and “magisterium” to portray evil in his novels. Religious faith is portrayed as pre-scientific superstition. We need to be able to reply “No, that’s not true. Let me tell you why...” We need to be able to say “Goodness for its own sake is not enough, and let me tell you why...”

The faith of Easter begins to turn this week to the power and grace of God the Holy Spirit. We begin the original Novena, or nine days of prayer, from Ascension Day to Pentecost (*and there's a [link](#) here for some ideas of how to pray on these days*) Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter, is a vital feast for us (and hence usually a Holy Day of Obligation). It is not an awkward, quaint bit of doctrine out of keeping in the world of science and to be quietly explained away. No, it is the big underlining of the answer to the question who is Jesus? In the Ascension the divine and the created are marvellously combined. Our doctrine is not theory. It describes reality. No wonder the Gospel that day (Thursday this week) says they fell down and worshipped him.

So, two things to finish with today and for our prayers, and I’m sorry I have gone on a long time today. First, don’t be afraid of doctrine. We say the Creed each Sunday. When we are initiated in the faith we ask questions about what we believe. The text of the Creed, of our doctrine, is proudly on display in both our churches - for reference, if you like! Study and ask questions! St Peter says we are all to be theologians. Secondly, ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom to do what St Peter describes: respectfully to witness for Christ in the face of derision and aggression. Inevitably, when we say that specific things are right and other things are wrong, people get upset. To be able to say these things well and convincingly starts with loving Jesus because he is God-With-Us. Our aim is not to win an argument or score points off someone else. Our aim is to win that soul for Christ and for eternal life. Dumbed down Catholicism is useless for that. St Peter says so, because he knew it for himself, and he is no cleverer or better than you or me at this!

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a happy continuing of the Easter season. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch.