

Fr James' homily for the Seventh Sunday of Easter 2020

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 1:12-14
Second Reading: First Letter of St Peter 4:13-16
Gospel: John 17:1-11



My theme today, as the church waits for the coming of God the Holy Spirit, is the work Jesus gives us and aspects of “virtual” worship and “real” worship.

One casualty of the Covid emergency has been “*The God who speaks*” (remember the logo, shown above here), our year to focus on the use of Holy Scripture in our worship. Indeed, how we use scripture, engage and be formed by the word. Today I want to start with reminding us of that, in order to reflect a little on how we worship in this present reality with all of its challenges and sadnesses.

The Acts of the Apostles today takes us right back to the start, and shows us the church in the nine days of prayer in which we now find ourselves. Are you there, with Mary and the others? Are you there, as you read the passage, in the hidden upper room in that “virtual” way of the heart? This “virtual” way is also a “real” way of the spirit.

In *The first letter of St Peter* the first Pope does his job - he tells the faith straight. Very real. In Christ risen and now ascended we are united to the glory of the life of God...and inevitably part of that deal is to be sharing Christ's sufferings, now, for real. It makes me think of Chesterton's great poetry “*I tell you naught for your comfort...*” (Look up “The ballad of the White Horse” An epic allegory of the fight against evil.)

The *Gospel of John* today gives us the last words of Jesus before he goes to Gethsemane and his passion, symbolically on this last Sunday of Easter. Look at the chapter in context in your bible at home. Here again is the truly human Jesus: his words are full of anxiety, you can almost feel his stomach turning over. He speaks in rapid, clipped sentences. But also these are the words of God-With-Us, knowing that his faithfulness and resurrection will be his glory, and our glory.

“*I am not in the world any longer, but they are in the world...*” Don't over-literalise these words as you pray with them this Sunday. As at his Ascension Jesus is not talking about a journey through space. He is not going away, as on vacation. His glory is to be present to **all** space and time, to where he can touch all things, all sufferings. You and I now have the privilege of continuing his real work “below.” We have work to do, and these nine days of prayer can help us renew this understanding.

This work of bringing the risen Christ to the world is infinitely varied, of course. At present perhaps in telephoning a friend or neighbour, or doing shopping etc. I want

to reflect briefly on where it starts, in our worship. What makes our worship real? The formal word that we use is “liturgy” and this simply means “work.” When we worship, when we join the liturgy of the church, we are doing our work. Our worship is not supposed to entertain us, or to satisfy our wishes. It is not, in that sense, to be “enjoyed” like a good book or a movie. It is, rather, what we give to God - and in doing so we receive what we truly need - and that is the way to true enjoyment, true feeding.

To save space, can I refer you back to my homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, five weeks ago, for more on this? I urge you all again, to use this enforced time of isolation from our normal, formal worship to renew our understanding of what **real** worship is - that the risen ascended Lord gives us a job to do. This is also the goal of the year of *“The God who speaks.”*

I am finding that my Sunday worship especially is getting a bit long! I reflect on my Intention for Mass. I stop and reflect on the readings. I spend time on the prayers of intercession, remembering as many particular needs and people as possible. I include a time of silent prayer. When we get back to public Mass, I won't be able to do all that, but I will better understand what the Mass is, and my part in it as an ordained priest. On-line streamed resources can also help with this, but they are not a substitute for our own work. Treat this time in lockdown as its own precious opportunity, not a time of loss. One cheerful telephone call recently said it all. I asked if the caller was using our website and on-line resources. No, she replied, she did not have the internet, but she said “Father, we are together at Mass-time!”

It is a suffering to be away from the familiar, and we can ask, why not just do “virtual” worship and join in a streamed liturgy? Some parishes are using this resource, others are not. On 17 April Pope Francis reflected in his daily homily about what he saw as the potential dangers of becoming an on-line church. On-line worship is a useful aid to doing our real work. BUT it cannot replace it. The Pope was full of unease about this. Essentially his unease was that an aid to feeling connected and reassured can end up separating us more by turning us in on ourselves as consumers of a product. Local experience of the last weeks is interesting. One neighbouring parish, who is not live-streaming, received a comment “I like online Mass. I think in future I'll not come to church so much.” Another neighbouring parish, who is Sunday streaming, analysed their viewing figures, to find that the average view was 15 minutes. The parish priest was properly disturbed.

Online resources are great if they help us to form ourselves into disciples who know what their real work is. Our sacrificial priestly work. Our work as St Peter says today *“to share in the suffering of Christ.”* This week I've been on the receiving end of a lot of unhappiness. I think it has a lot to do with people's unease at the uncertain course of lockdown. It ended up in an amusing way. An angry lady came to the door. When I

politely asked for social distance, the lady said some words I won't repeat, they are not nice out-loud words. She then told me off for not ringing the church bells for Thursday night "clap for carers". When I pointed out we have no bells in our tower, apparently that was my fault too! Ironically, we have been thinking about putting in *virtual* bells!!! - we can't justify the cost right now.

It is part of priesthood to soak up the anger of the world (not just my priesthood, but yours, the whole priestly people). Let us use our prayer this week, preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit, to ask God to help us put down real, stable roots into our worship. Cardinal Vincent asks us to join together especially next Saturday evening in our different upper rooms, separated in one way, together in the most real way. There's more about this on the [homepage](#).

As I write there is a real blackbird sitting on the tower singing. Pause as you read this. In your heart, can you hear the bird singing? Alleluia.

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed time of novena. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch.

- Fr James' homily for the Second Sunday of Easter can be found [here](#).
- Texts for our worship (Acts of contrition and Spiritual Communion, can be found [here](#).