

Homily for Seventh Sunday of Easter 24th May 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

During Eastertide I have been following daily readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Apart from anything else, it is a good story with lots of interesting detail. I am looking forward to reading about Paul's arrival in Malta, an exciting account of the shipwreck which landed him there. Do look it up in chapters 27 and 28, as I don't think it is ever read at Mass.

Last week there was the account of Paul's time in Ephesus, a major city of what is now Turkey, with its great temple of the goddess Diana which was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. When Paul started telling people and persuading them that gods made with hands were not gods at all, local craftsmen who made and sold images of Diana started to be worried and fearful for their livelihood – you cannot really blame them. They got together a great demonstration against Paul in the city's theatre, where, we are told, 'some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.' This is an acute observation: I should imagine that in any big demonstration there will always be plenty of people who are there just for the fun of it and do not know or even care what the demonstration is about.

But then I wonder how often it is the case in human affairs that we do not know what is going on. We know what is happening at the surface of things, but what is going on underneath at the heart of them may not be apparent to us. The universe is infinitely mysterious. To give a full explanation of even a simple action like writing something down on paper, all the many elements and processes that are involved, would lead us into endless detail. We could imagine, for instance, that the desk we are writing on is a solid object, but if we could see into the heart of it at the microscopic level we would be aware of streams of atoms whizzing about at high speed. Although invisible to us that is just as much part of the reality of what is happening.

This is also true, I believe, of our spiritual life. We go along doing what we do, but where God is in it, what God may be saying to us in what goes on and in the people we deal with may not always be clear. These days, people tend to use the word *discernment* for the business of seeing where God is, and the great guide here is St. Ignatius of Loyola. His 'Spiritual Exercises' have a couple of pages of rules for discerning spirits and discerning the will of God, and you can tell that this is not a simple or straightforward matter by the fact that the standard commentary on this part of his work consists of two thick volumes. Even then we get things wrong, make mistakes and misinterpret: discernment can never be totally certain.

This is why we need the presence of God's Spirit to help us be aware of how God is moving in us. And the great thing is we do have the Spirit! In the letter to the Romans Paul says, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' *Has*

been: it is not something that will happen in the future or may happen if we deserve it by living a good life, it has already happened. Simply by virtue of being born into this world the Spirit of God is given to us, so in a sense we do not really need to pray for the coming of the Spirit, as we are invited to do in these days between the Ascension and Pentecost, the original Novena. It commemorates the nine days when the apostles gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem together with Mary and other women and other followers of Jesus, after they had seen him return to God and were waiting for the promised Spirit to come to them. We hear of this episode in the first reading at Mass on this 7th Sunday of Easter.

There is always more of God for us to know and experience, more of the Spirit that may be given to us, but perhaps we can say that we are praying to become more aware of the Spirit present in us, more in touch, that is, with the centre of our own human being. It is not a matter of trying to influence God to behave in certain ways, but of being open to God's reality and presence with us already. In order to do this, we need to spend time in silence and stillness, letting go of our own thoughts and ideas and concerns and being present where we are – which is where God is.

It is easy enough to think that there is a loving and caring God we can be in tune with when things are going well, when the sun shines, we are happy and everything seems rosy. Much more difficult when the going gets tough, when we face hardships and difficulties, when we face situations like the current pandemic. Here it becomes even more vital to keep faith, to go on trusting in God's providence and care for us against all the odds. And if we can do so we can come through to a better place.

I was once taking part in a retreat at Damascus House in Mill Hill. It was something I had wanted to do and had booked a long time ahead, as one often has to do with retreats. It may be, however, when the time comes round that the prospect is not quite so inviting, it may even be the last thing in the world you feel like doing! But you have booked it and paid the money, so off you go. During the week of this particular retreat I felt more and more out of place, I could not get into it and started to be irritated by the other people, the leaders, the things they were saying. One afternoon I went out for a walk determined that when I got back I would say, "I've had enough of this, I'm going home!" But I remembered another precept of St. Ignatius. that if you have made a decision and believe it to be in line with God's will when you made it, do not go back on it when you are feeling let down and ill at ease. That is more likely to be your own state of mind, the effect of passing circumstances, than a sign from God that you decided wrongly. So, believing this to be good advice, and recalling how deciding to do the retreat had seemed right at the time, I carried on to the end and could say looking back that it was a good and beneficial experience from which I gained a great deal.

This is not maybe a very important event, but it was significant to me, a most useful learning curve. We as the Church are the ones who have chosen to follow God because we believe it to be the right thing for us to do and what will eventually bring us fulfilment, but it is in the nature

of things that this will be a journey, and like most journeys full of ups and downs, twists and turns, times of hard going as well as the easy stretches. At present the whole world and we with it is in the Slough of Despond, a trough of doubt, fear and uncertainty - all the more important, therefore, that the Church keeps faith with God and continues on our path in hope and trust.

Jesus says, 'When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth.' In these days leading to Pentecost let us be open to the Spirit within us and ask the Spirit to help us to be faithful to our calling as God's people.

With all best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk