

Homily for Fifth Sunday of Easter 10th May 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

Pope Francis has called for Thursday of this week, 14 May, to be '*a day of prayer and fasting and works of charity, to implore God to help humanity overcome the coronavirus pandemic.*'

We would all agree I am sure that this is a good idea, but I have been wondering if there is any particular reason why this date has been chosen. It is the feast day of Saint Matthias, who was chosen to make up the missing place in the band of apostles vacated by Judas Iscariot. There were two qualifications that had to be fulfilled to be counted as an apostle: one was to be a member of the group that had been with Jesus from the time he began his public ministry and the other was to be a witness of his Resurrection.

Two candidates emerged. After prayer and petition to the Holy Spirit the lot fell on Matthias. Not much is heard of him after this, but he was certainly one of the followers of Christ who were sent out (apostle means 'one sent out') to continue his work. You can find the account in the Acts of the Apostles, which we read extensively in Eastertide and which is sometimes called the *Gospel of the Holy Spirit*, written by Saint Luke as a sequel to the Gospel known by his name. It records how the first apostles of Christ, who had seen the great deeds he had done and knew he was risen from the dead, were led by the Spirit to carry on Christ's work of making God known by teaching and healing.

I once knew someone who wanted to make a play out of the book of Acts, on the lines of the mystery plays which retold the stories of Scripture in dramatic form.

Seeing the play one realised why nobody had thought of doing this before. There was a lot of argument and shouting, and once Paul started on his missionary journeys it became very repetitive. Paul and his companions arrive in one place and go to the synagogue to tell their fellow Jews about Christ; some listeners are interested and want to know more, but before long opposition gets up and Paul is forced to move on. He arrives in another place; he goes to the synagogue ... etc. etc. This happens several times over and the play included rather too many of these scenes.

Our human life is, to be sure, often repetitive. The same things happen over and over again, we ourselves easily get into repeated patterns of behavior and attitudes. There is a good side to this, as we need continuity and stability to be at home in ourselves and our lives: too much and too rapid change disorients and disables us. But on the other hand too much of the same can leave us listless and apathetic.

Paul found the ability to carry on through all his repeated ups and downs because he was so blazingly convinced that he knew the risen Christ and was chosen to do his work, and so was able to endure anything in his mission to make him known to others. One of his most striking sayings is, 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.' That little phrase *in Christ*, which recurs often in Paul's writings, expresses in fact our own condition as people given the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us so that we can dwell in God - and to do so by virtue of the humanity we share with Christ. As the early Church put it, *God became human so that human beings might become God.*

When you think about it this is a stupendous, mind-blowing assertion, but it is what our faith tells us, and the more we can know that we are in Christ and Christ is in us, then the more we will be able to live our lives out of that deep centre and fulfil our own mission to be *apostles* - those whom God has chosen and sent out to be Christ in our world of today. All our prayer, worship, acts of charity are means to help us to be in Christ.

The Gospel reading for this 5th Sunday of Easter is a favourite passage for funerals, since it says that Christ is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us in God's kingdom, a thought which can give much consolation when we are saying farewell to loved ones. It begins with Jesus saying, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' and I often think it is all very well to say that, but as human beings our hearts are troubled by many things, not least the death of those we know and love. But then Jesus' heart too was troubled, by the death of his friend Lazarus and when he felt himself abandoned by God on the Cross.

Knowing you are in Christ and Christ is in you will not make you immune to the misfortunes and upsets of human living nor to the feelings they cause in us, but what it can do is give faith and hope and courage to continue our journey of faith without losing heart and find the ability to endure when endurance is all we have.

Our current situation seems to be one of those times when all we can do is endure - through all the doubt, fear and uncertainty. We are as affected by these things as anyone else, but as the Church we have the vocation above all to hold before the world the message that there is a loving God who can be known in Christ and that through him our destiny is to live in the kingdom both now and in the life to come.

Do find time if you can this Thursday to join Pope Francis in prayer, fasting and acts of charity for God's protection. A good way of praying would be to read the Gospel for the day (John 15: 9-17) and spend some time pondering what it is saying to you and how you can show God's love and care to others: Jesus says, 'You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last.'

All best wishes and prayers, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)

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