

Homily for Sixth Sunday of Easter 17th May 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

As the weeks of lockdown go by we keep wondering when we will get back to normal. When will we be able to meet in church for Mass again, when can we have a meal in a restaurant or go to a football or cricket match? When can we get back to work or children to school? There are a few signs of things lifting, but there is clearly still a long way to go. I heard it suggested that we will simply have to write off 2020 as a dead year, put up the shutters and wait for 2021 to come round. That does not sound like a very encouraging approach, so maybe the best thing is take each day as it comes and make the most of it as far as we can, while looking forward in hope to a change for the better,

When our present situation is hard and difficult, we can comfort ourselves by dreaming of a better future, but also by looking back to the past when we were young and everything in the garden was rosy. Well, not entirely if we are honest, but memory is such an important part of our human make-up, and although we can only live in the present memory can help us to do that.

The great prophets are often telling the people to look back. Remember how God has dealt with you before now. Remember how God saved you from death and slavery in Egypt and led you to the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. We are here now in the desert, making our way there. It's hot and empty, the going is tough, but our memory of how God has led us so far can give us resolve and courage to continue the journey, trusting that God will go on leading us and bring us eventually to our destination. Keep on keeping on is the watchword.

One of the readings in today's Mass suggested a particular memory to me. Philip, a follower of Jesus, goes to a Samaritan town to proclaim Christ and many of the people welcomed his message and accepted the word of God. We often hear of Samaria in the Gospels. It was an area of central Palestine which had its own religious customs and beliefs that made the people deeply suspect to orthodox Jews: from their point of view the Samaritans were a heretical sect. Samaritans, for instance, thought that the right place to worship God was not Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where God instructed Solomon to build the temple, but Mount Gerizim which overlooks their own city of Shechem, also called Sychar (where Jesus met the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well) and today Nablus. The ancient temple on the top of the high hill is now in ruins and the Samaritan sect ever dwindling in numbers.

As we know well, Christ's mission was not confined to any one set of people, certainly not those who consider themselves holy and saved. This may be why Samaritans figure prominently in the Gospels: they are the least likely people to want to listen to the message of Christ, but they do! And of course in the parable Jesus chooses a Samaritan traveller as an example of really following God's ways when the conventionally religious fail to do so.

On a visit to the Holy Land we went one day to Sebastia, the ancient capital of Samaria in the hills overlooking Nablus, where one of the Herods built a Roman town with baths and temples to impress his overlords. You can see their impressive remains. It was a very hot day with few people about, but a tourist shop was open and a large empty restaurant which had air-conditioning and was wonderfully cool! As the only customers the restaurant-owner was naturally pleased to see us, but what impressed me was the genuine delight with which he served us his food, fresh local salads with hummus to die for and the most delicious warmed flat bread. I can almost taste it all now as I remember the occasion and the scene. Not the most important of events perhaps, but one whose memory gives me much pleasure. You will all, I am sure, have your own special memories which you can enjoy and savour all over again: somehow food often figures prominently!

On the coach afterwards our guide told us that this part of the West Bank is in Palestinian Zone B where the external affairs are controlled by Israel, which does not allow the export of produce outside the area itself, so farmers find it difficult to make a living. Some things never change! It seems especially sad that after 2,000 years Samaritans are still badly done by in their own homeland.

In one way our current situation is nothing new. There have been great plagues before now and widespread epidemics with large loss of life. In the face of disaster people did somehow find the ability to carry on and eventually rebuild their shattered society. Memories and dreams of the future would help them to keep going, but for Christians what above all gives us hope is faith in the living Lord. Human affairs tend to go round in cycles, the same things recur over and over, but God in Christ is doing something new. The Resurrection of Christ, the centre and heart of Christian faith, offers us the possibility of breaking out of our endlessly repeated patterns into a new dimension of being, which is the eternal newness of God's kingdom.

This sixth week of Eastertide includes Ascension Thursday when we celebrate Christ's triumphant return to the Father, his work on earth complete. It is for the Church now to hold out to the world the promise of God's new life. I hope you are able to find ways of enjoying this season, for even in lockdown we are still an Easter people and our song is Alleluia!

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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