

Homily for Pentecost Sunday 31st May 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

One Saturday in summer some years ago I was driving with friends to Buxton in Derbyshire to go to a concert at the festival there, one of those enjoyable events that this year cannot take place. It was a long drive and a very hot day, we felt quite parched on arrival so the first thing we did was to go to a café and enjoy ice-cold spa water, which you can buy in shops as Buxton water. It was the most delicious drink I can ever remember! There is nothing like water for quenching your thirst on a hot day.

Water is indeed vital for us. It can be dangerous in floods and torrents, but it cleanses and refreshes and it is essential for life. In the story of creation, it was only when the seas were made that life could emerge on earth, first plant life, then animals and humans. Our bodies I believe contain 75% water and two thirds of the earth is made up of water. Whenever space probes detect traces of water on other planets or in other galaxies some people get excited at the thought that there might be life somewhere else in the universe other than just our own earth.

I am concerned at the prolonged absence of rain just now. It is good in the midst of lockdown to have a spell of warm weather, even if we cannot enjoy it in ways we would ordinarily do, but the lack of rain is making the ground dry and plants are beginning to wilt. There is a park near where I live with a stream running alongside in which the water level is noticeably dropping: maybe this is why the heron I like to see there has disappeared in search of wetter conditions elsewhere.

Water can be a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who also cleans and refreshes and is even more necessary for life. God is the author of all life, the creator of the universe and all its many elements. It is God's Spirit who swept like a wind over the face of the waters to bring life into being. On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the coming of the Spirit to the first followers of Jesus. A rushing wind filled the house where they were sitting and tongues of fire rested on them.

An ancient hymn for the day, of the type known as a Sequence, says of the Spirit:

Left without your presence here

Life itself would disappear,

Nothing thrives apart from you!

It also speaks of the Spirit as 'sweet refreshment, ... pleasant coolness in the heat, consolation in our woes.' Coolness in heat, wind, fire – the Spirit is all of these, and the Spirit's work is to enliven, to bring life and also to unite. Since all life is the creation and the gift of God, all life is one in God through the power of the Spirit. Whatever separates and divides is overcome by the Spirit. The barriers our different languages make between us were overcome at Pentecost, as people of every race and language could understand – in their own language, that is, at the

heart of themselves, at a level deeper than surface divisions – what Peter and the others were saying. The tower of Babel, where human language was divided, is thrown down by Pentecost.

Maybe it is a special gift of this otherwise uncomfortable time we are living through that we are appreciating more of what unites us. There are many signs of how people are becoming more appreciative, for example, of those who give us our essential services: the NHS certainly, but also farmers who provide the food we need, those who work in transport, in shops and supermarkets, in refuse collection. We usually take them for granted, but realising how much we rely on them helps to see how interdependent society is, how united at its centre by our common humanity.

We are appreciating also more of the world around us, birdsong and trees, all life indeed as the sign of God's creative love, all life as sacred and therefore special, however ordinary it may be. And this deeper sense of appreciation is the result of a greater possibility of being still and listening, which is another product of this time when our lives are emptier of what normally fills them. Emptiness is not just negative, but can be a means to deeper, richer insight, if we can use the opportunities wisely and well.

Pentecost is our Christian version of the Jewish festival of Shavuot that occurs at this time. It coincides with the first fruits of the wheat harvest and commemorates the giving of the Law through Moses at mount Sinai.

For Jewish people the Law is the pledge of God's presence with them, for us it is the Spirit active in Jesus and his apostles who assures us that God is with us and we are always in God. Shavuot has other names, one of which is *Atzeret*, which means closure. After their delivery from slavery in Egypt and forty years' journey through the wilderness to the promised land the giving of the Law completes this phase of the life of God's people. Now they are to live the full, God-filled life which God makes possible for them and gives them the freedom to live.

For the Church in a similar way Pentecost, the fiftieth day, completes the season of Easter and gives way to 'Ordinary Time,' the season in which we must live the new life of the risen Lord and do so guided and inspired by the Spirit. The term "Ordinary" makes it sound dull and workaday, but one suggestion is that it really means "ordered," time which does not just drift on, but is filled with and given order by the guidance of God's Spirit, in that sense not ordinary but special, and we who are the Church likewise have the freedom to make of it what we will.

As we look forward to the return to normality, not least in the Church itself when our buildings can be open once more and the sacraments publicly celebrated, it will be important not to lose sight of what we have learned and gained through lockdown, but, as I heard a rabbi say, use the freedom we have "to shape a more attentive, appreciative and compassionate reality." Who

knows, when everything is back to normal, we might even begin to regret the blessed quiet and peacefulness we are presently experiencing. Enjoy it while you can!

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

P.S. The Sequence for Pentecost is said to be written by Stephen Langton, whom Pope Innocent III wished to appoint as archbishop of Canterbury. Because King John would not accept his choice the Pope put the Church in England under an interdict, which meant that Mass could not be celebrated in churches. Only baptisms and confession for the dying were permitted. This situation lasted for six years! England in the 13th century was of course a very different world, but the Church recovered and normal service was eventually resumed. We can hope that it will be so for us today.

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