

Homily for The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ Sunday 14th June 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

My family lived at one time in Bristol, where we used to go to concerts in the Colston Hall. I don't remember now if I ever knew why it had that name, but it must be in memory of Edward Colston whose statue was thrown down the other day by a protesting crowd. He made a lot of money from the slave trade, though he did make large donations to charitable causes. Whether there were redeeming features in the life of Saddam Hussein I do not know, and probably most of us rejoiced with the people of Baghdad when they toppled over the statue of the hated dictator, but there was another event recently when a statue that had been displaced was restored. At the end of the 1st World War people protesting against the Catholic Habsburg monarchy of Austria destroyed a statue of the Virgin Mary in the centre of Prague, but it was remade and replaced last week, the mayor of Prague stating that many people regretted its loss and he thought it right to restore it as a focus of faith and affection.

Statues and the history they remind us of can clearly arouse strong and sometimes conflicting emotions. Trafalgar Square at the heart of London is dominated by the statue of a great naval hero, but what would we say about his personal life, which was not exactly beyond reproach and is just as much part of his story as his victories over Napoleon? Good and bad seem to be inextricably mixed together in human lives, which is one reason why we need the rule of law to provide a framework by which we can seek the good.

The destroying of statues reminds me of Moses' reaction when he had delivered God's Law to the people at Sinai and almost the first thing they did was to go against it by making a golden calf to worship, even though the very first commandment forbade the making of images of God. 'Moses' anger,' we are told, 'burned hot, and he threw down the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.' How's that for an outburst of furious rage – occasioned by a statue?!

Idolatry, the worship of images, is a constant temptation in the case of a God whom we cannot see or know with any of our senses. As human beings we naturally relate to things that we can hear and see and touch, but God goes beyond any image or idea that we can form of God, and it is therefore important that we do not seek to limit our understanding of God to things that we can readily relate to, for then we may be worshipping not the true God but our image of God or something else entirely, as people will worship power or money or success. St. Augustine went as far as to say that if you can understand it, it is not God! However well-loved or cherished our images of God may be, in the end they are only images and not God himself.

The tablets of the Law fortunately could be remade and from then on they were the people's most precious possession, the sign that God was with them and would continue to be with them wherever they went. (Their loss, conversely, was the greatest disaster that could befall them). In the famous verse from the beginning of St. John's Gospel, 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,' the word translated "dwelt" really means in the original Greek "pitched his tent." A tent is something temporary that you set up at the end of the day, then pack up the next morning as you prepare to travel on. Thus God's presence in the world is not static or fixed in one place, but travels with us wherever we go.

Two weeks ago we kept the feast of Pentecost, originally a Jewish harvest festival which also commemorated the giving of the Law. For Christians the coming of the Holy Spirit is God's pledge to us that God is always with us, giving us life, nurturing with us with his gifts, dwelling within us – and for us God's presence is assured above all by Jesus' giving of himself, his body and blood, in the Holy Eucharist, the gift that is renewed every time we celebrate the Mass. On the Thursday of Holy Week we remember the Last Supper at which Jesus instituted this sacrament, but since it is so central to our religion it is good that we have a day set aside solely for thanksgiving for the Eucharist (eucharist means thanksgiving), the feast of Corpus Christi that we keep on this Sunday. It was first suggested by St. Thomas Aquinas and decreed for the whole Church in 1264.

The Scripture readings for the feast this year begin with a passage from Deuteronomy in which Moses reminds the people of how God has led them for forty years through 'the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions.' He made water flow for them from flint rock and fed them with manna from heaven 'to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' All this was 'to humble you and test you, and in the end to do you good.'

People often talk about God testing us, almost suggesting that God makes bad things happen just to see what we are made of and whether we will keep faith in him. It is a manner of speaking, but we should be careful how we understand it. A God of universal love and compassion, as we believe God to be, could not possibly want the people he creates and loves to suffer and certainly not *cause* suffering to happen to them. What I do think is that God is present in everything that happens and that, in perhaps mysterious ways that we cannot fathom God's will is being done. How we respond to our varying situations can be a way of showing what sort of faith we have, whether we do see God in all things, so in that sense there is a form of testing going on, but we should avoid all idea of God creating situations to test our faith in him – and, as Deuteronomy says, in the end God will do good to us.

It is especially hard for us to see God in this time of lockdown, which does indeed seem like an arid wasteland with hidden dangers lurking in store for us. There is a terrible irony in celebrating Corpus Christi when most of us are unable to receive the Eucharist that is given precisely in order to feed us with God's life and give us strength to continue our journey of faith. We can

know, however, that this situation will not last forever, and even now the Church is planning to resume public Masses in a few weeks' time. It will have to be different from our usual forms, but at least we will be able to gather in the church, to be together as the body of Christ and receive the body of Christ, the most precious gift of God to his people. Meantime if we can remember how God has led us and fed us in the past, that can give faith and hope to believe that God is with us now and that after this testing time we will know his love and goodness anew.

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