

A Homily for the 7th Sunday of Easter from Fr Allan

Last Thursday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. The Ascension is one of the most important feasts in the Church's calendar. It marks Jesus' return to his Father. He was sent by his Father to save us, to lead us to glory, to lead us into the presence of the Father. His work is done and his life on earth has come "full circle". Where he has gone we will follow. The preface for the Ascension says that Jesus ascended not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members might be confident of following where he, our head and founder, has gone before. It is not as if he has gone to some far distant place in outer space where his presence will grow dim. He promised his disciples that he would be with them always, to the end of time. He also promised that he would send them the Spirit who would be their advocate, their counsellor, their guide, their teacher. The Holy Spirit would be their "breath". The Spirit would breathe new life into them. Next Sunday we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit with the Solemnity of Pentecost. Traditionally the nine days from the Ascension to Pentecost is marked by a "Novena". A Novena is a period of nine days of special prayer in which we pray and prepare ourselves to be open to whatever the Holy Spirit asks of us in order to bring us into God's presence. This year we are being asked to pray for all those who have died and who are suffering because of Coronavirus. We are asked to pray that we will be able to hand the suffering of these times over to God. (Details of the Novena will be found on the parish website)

This Novena time is an "in-between" time. Yes, we are in between Ascension and Pentecost and we are in between LOSS and PROMISE. After the crucifixion the disciples were completely lost. Their whole world had fallen apart. All their hope had been that Jesus was the Saviour who would lead them on to a glorious future. Of course this was true but they had understood things differently. They were going through their grief locked away in an upper room in isolation. This is a time of great loss for them.

Many people are going through a period of great loss at this very moment. As well as the families who have lost loved ones because of Covid-19 there are others who are experiencing loss in other ways. People have lost their jobs and financial security; others have lost communication with their support systems; young people especially have lost physical contact with school friends who are so important to them. Other people feel they have lost their freedom and their ability to provide for those they love; while others will feel they have lost their good mental health. Several people have said to me personally that things after 'this' will never be the same again. Every aspect of our lives will be changed. The way we work, play, worship and live will all be changed. It's as if we have come from one world and are going to another. This makes us unnerved and unsettled because we are uncertain of what the future holds. It's as if our lockdown is our "upper room".

However, I believe that just as Jesus visited the disciples after the crucifixion and gave them hope and promise, he comes to visit us in our lockdown. In other conversations people have told me stories of great acts of kindness; a greater community spirit; the ability to sit back and enjoy God's creation; to be still. All of these instances and many others besides are examples of hope and promise. They are glimpses into life with God. They point us to the life of the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles St Luke seems to be telling us that this in-between time may be difficult. It may even be hard. He seems to suggest that there are three ways to cope with this time. He seems to imply that we should pray. We are told that the apostles "all... joined in

continuous prayer'. We are also told that the apostles were joined by Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. Even at this early stage a community was being formed. So, the message is that we pray even when we say that we can't pray or when we doubt. Even the words "Lord, where are you?" can be a prayer.

A second coping mechanism is to get our priorities right. The implication from St Luke is that we should get rid of all that is unimportant in our lives and try to return to a more simplified life. This might involve spending more time with the family or reaching out to the needy neighbour that we don't see very often. Perhaps the time in-between loss and promise doesn't need to be as difficult as we think. Reassessing our values and making our lives more simplified may be quite an enjoyable thing to do.

Finally, the third piece of advice from St Luke is to live this time with hope. We are reassured that the Holy Spirit comes to those with hope. The seeds of hope are sown in the upper room. The gardeners among us will have plenty of hope as they care and nurture their gardens. (Several have told me that their gardens have never looked this good!) These days before Pentecost are like a seedtime of hope. It's a good image to hold on to. At first gardeners don't see the fruits of their hard work. They have to wait and be patient. It may seem as if nothing is happening. As time goes by and as the lockdown continues, we may feel impatient and want to move quicker than we are allowed to. The Holy Spirit HAS come to us and we celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost again to remind ourselves that where Jesus has gone we will follow. It is especially in times of suffering and uncertainty that we must live with hope.