

An Address by Bill Pattinson for the 6th Sunday of Easter

Theme: Hope. Acts 17:22-31; John14:15-21

It has and continues to be a glorious spring, sunny, warm, well most of the time, verdant, full of flower, full of hope for a blazing June and a magnificent summer. For those of us who have gardens or allotments, we have had the time to tend them carefully and fully like never before, locked down and staying at home as we are.

All this is very pertinent in our present Christian season. Today is Rogation Sunday when traditionally we pray for farmers and their crops, for full barns and a rich harvest. Processions would have been held, at our own St Michael's for instance, and boundaries beaten, not so common these days. The three days before Ascension Day, this coming Thursday, were days of fasting. I won't hold you to that. Certainly our crop growers and farmers need our prayers at this moment, not so much for a successful harvest, although I'm sure that would be welcome, but for workers to pick the crops and open shops in which to sell them. Let's hope our prayers are answered.

As well as Rogation Sunday today is the sixth Sunday of Easter, the season when hope is given a name, the name of a person, Jesus Christ. Hope of new life, of eternal life, of a resurrected life. He has defeated death and is with us now to walk with us through our present struggles. If you believe, you hope. And because we have hope, this time, this place, this "now" matters infinitely. All that exists is caught up in the love of Christ. "In him we live and move and have our being," Paul says to the Athenians in his sermon in front of the Areopagus, a prominent rock near the Acropolis in Athens.

In our previous secularised culture, the one I'll call BP, before the Pandemic, we often struggled to find hope, except on the next distraction - hope for a relaxing holiday, a good night out, a pay rise, a new car. Now these perspectives have changed. The Coronavirus pandemic has made us wish for new hopes - hope to sit at table again with relatives and friends, to have freedom in our comings and goings, to go to the theatre, or the football, to see a new transformed NHS, to value those who care for us, to maintain a less

polluted world. Nothing however replaces the promise and hope that Jesus offers to his disciples, and that means us, in the gospel Reading, the hope, indeed the promise, of the Holy Spirit.

It is at this time we look forward to Jesus' Ascension, this coming Thursday, and to Pentecost in two weeks time, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is telling his disciples at the Last Supper that "In a little while the world will no longer see me.." This is because he is ascending to his rightful place to be at the right hand of his Father in Heaven. But the absence of Jesus does not mean the absence of God. He is not going to leave his disciples orphaned. Rather he will be with them in a different form, that of the Holy Spirit. So it is for us. At the beginning of the prayer before Holy Communion we hear the words:

"The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us."

God is here today, he is ever-present, in our lives through his Holy Spirit. "You know him," Jesus says, "because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

The Holy Spirit is called by more than one name. He is known as "helper". He comes to give to God's people strength and energy to do what they have to do, to live for God, witnessing to his world of love. He is known as "comforter" supporting us in times of disaster and tragedy, in times of isolation and loneliness. He is known as the "Advocate", speaking on our behalf in times of trouble. He is known as the "Spirit of Truth" so that we can live lives that do justice as far as we are able.

With the Holy Spirit in us, with Jesus' own breath, his own inner life within us, with God in us, our hopes can become our realities. The fruits of the Holy Spirit - those of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - are flourishing at this moment as richly as the plants, flowers and crops are in the gardens we tender. If ever you required proof of the existence of the Holy Spirit at work, look no further than how so many people are behaving during this pandemic. You don't need me to point to the evidence of the Spirit's fruits prospering. The hope is that in AP time, after the pandemic, these fruits will continue to flourish and grow and the richest of harvests might be harnessed.

I am encouraged by the wealth of poetry found on the website at the moment, recognising some of the blessings of the lockdown and hoping for a future which maintains and develops these blessings. From the many, I have chosen the closing lines of a Franciscan Irish priest, Richard Hendrick, who wrote his poem, simply entitled “Lockdown” in mid-March. I’ve added two lines at the end - I don’t think he’ll mind:

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,

Spring is coming,

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul

And though you may not be able

to touch across the empty square,

Sing

“The Lord is here

His Spirit is with us”