

Sermon for 17th May Sixth Sunday of Easter

Reading (1) – Acts 17.22-31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

Reading (2) – 1 Peter 3.13-22

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Gospel Reading – 1 Peter 3.13-22

John 14.15-21

¹⁵ ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

If you love me you will keep my commandments An address by Revd Mandy Flaherty

There are four things I want to take from this morning's readings – one each from the first two readings and two from the gospel reading. And these are: 'for in him we live and move and have our being', 'no-one will harm you if you do good', 'if you love me you will keep my commandments' and 'I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you'. In and of themselves, these statements are self explanatory and tell a story but I want to do a bit of linking them together to encourage us in what we are doing.

Now, I wonder if you have any idea what this music is and what it might be used for?
(*Background Latino style music - Mandy starts to move in time*) Forgive my moves but it is of latino origin and it is Zumba music!

Why? Because I joined my first Zumba class this week – (*shouts*) Great Zoom Zumba class Annie! And if I was aching before I started from having too much sit down time, I was sure aching afterwards! Great class but I've got a long way to go to get all the twists, moves and turns you need for Zumba. (*Background music fades out*)

So, when Paul says to the Athenians in Acts, our first reading, that 'in him we live and move and have our being' I couldn't help but think about my Zumba experience and how those moves had affected my being! Of course I jest and Paul is reflecting on the closeness of God to us and how our human nature is better off by seeking God to help in all things.

We're not that good at asking for help most of the time, I guess, our nature is to be self sufficient and independent, determined even. I must admit, at 7.25 on Wednesday in my Zumba class, I wanted it to be over (sorry Annie!) but I was determined not to give in and to see it through to the end. I guess I'm not alone in that, perhaps true grit is a good description of how many of us have coped in these last few months of social distancing and isolation.

However, Paul encourages us to seek God in everything – he uses that strange and dubious phrase in the NRSV translation 'search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him' - it's certainly vivid if nothing else! Search for God and don't rely solely on ourselves. To recognise also that God is not far away – we are his offspring, says Paul, so we are closely related to God.

Now, we may not have seen our closest offspring or relatives for quite a while and the closest we may have been able to get to them is a wave from the window. I imagine we are all thinking about what it will be like when we do meet our parents, siblings, offspring, grandchildren, grandparents again. We'll probably want to rush and give them a hug, but we can't. However, it will be clear and it is already that whatever we can't do physically, we still have that natural bond with our blood relatives, and they are always near, even if far. God sees us in the same way – we are his offspring and he our Father so we are always near, even when we're far.

I have been challenged over these last few months about what I will take from this experience mentally and formatively once we emerge from it – not to go back to normal because we're aware there won't be an old normal but a new normal. But when I emerge, what will I take from it? How will I have changed? There's no doubt that fear plays a big part in today's world. We are fearful and worried about everything. Fear of this virus, fear of other people, places, fear of the economy collapsing, fear of dying, fear of change. And fear can paralyse us. We stay in our homes because we are fearful, and because we have to so that we can do our bit to help get rid of this awful virus. And when we are afraid, we need and we seek reassurance. In our second reading, Peter says 'no-one will harm you if you do good.' It's hard to believe that when we know that over 200 front-line NHS staff have died from doing good. They have been harmed by this virus.

And we pray for them, their families and their colleagues, who remain fearful but continue doing good. I stand back in admiration of their tenacity and courage in the face of adversity when they must naturally be afraid. Something gives them courage. When Daniel was in the lion's den, facing the mouths of the lions, something gave him courage and he wasn't afraid. Perhaps Peter is reflecting on that kind of courage, that withstands and takes away your fear. And in that sense, we are not harmed because we are no longer afraid.

Fear, perhaps, does us more harm than anything. I hope I emerge from this, having more courage and not being afraid of the things I was and am afraid of. Perhaps you will too.

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' I think these words of Jesus carry on very well from thoughts about fear because love can overtake and overwhelm fear. The impulse to love is stronger than anything. It certainly is God's impulse to love us. It is his main reason for being and his whole motivation towards us – to love. In John's gospel Jesus has walked with and loved his disciples for three years and now he is saying to them, if you love me you will keep my commandments. And his main commandment to them is to love one another as I have loved you. We sing it don't we? 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you...'

A world where love abounds is a world without fear or rather a world that isn't overtaken by fear. There may well be fearful things out there, but they don't overwhelm us or take over us. We can withstand them because we love and know we are loved, and were borne out of love – as God's offspring – in him we live and move and have our being – because we have been created and had life breathed into us. By God. I love that thought – that apart from the biological and physical miracle of each of our birth stories- d mine was pretty funny and gruesome if I had time to tell you...(?!), apart from that, God breathed life into us, gave us a unique and wonderful life, each one of us. Out of love.

I have a friend of mine who I have known for almost 30 years who I worked with in China who believed God spoke to her with the words from James which say Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. And from then on she sought to be a mother to orphans from Chinese orphanages.

Jesus says in John that he will not leave the disciples 'orphaned' - acknowledging God's Fatherhood to us all. Having been with them on earth as the Father in Jesus, he was not about to leave them orphaned. Fiona spoke to us last week about the words 'show us the Father' - in Jesus, the disciples saw the Father and could be confident in that to ask of him what they wanted. Here. A few verses on, Jesus says, as the Father, 'I will not leave you orphaned' and furthermore, 'I am coming to you'.

This is a beautiful picture of the Trinity – hard as that concept is to understand – we have Jesus showing us the Father in himself and the saying that once he has gone physically from the earth, they will not be left alone because 'I am coming to you' - as the Holy Spirit. God the Father and God the Son will be coming as God the Holy Spirit. And that is when all is complete. Jesus work on earth is done, the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and the work of the Church is born.

When we experience God today, however we do – in still quiet times, in songs, hymns, in words from others, in prayer, on our daily walks, in reading the bible, listening to others, or hearing a quiet voice inside, however we experience God's presence, it is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised would come that would not leave us orphaned. 'I am coming to you' - odd thing to say at that time as he was right there! But Jesus is pointing toward the coming of the Holy Spirit which is God working and being on earth with us. 'In him we live and move and have our being' - well, my Zumba moves are still to be perfected but God sustains me and helps me through, casting out my fear and pointing me towards his Love.

Amen.