

Message for The Sixth Sunday of Easter 2020

Today's second reading comes from the First Letter of St Peter, a letter that was written to the scattered little Christian flocks who were experiencing, or were living in fear of, persecution. St Peter writes to the Christian churches, small and fragile as they are, with a message of encouragement. When they are asked why they are hopeful, they are to have the answer ready. And the answer comes from the first words of today's reading, it comes from the reverence for the Lord that they hold in their hearts. If the Emperor was their Lord, well that might go well until the Empire starts to crumble, or the Emperor is murdered, or goes mad, or starts murdering his people. But the Emperor is not their Lord. If power and status was their Lord that would be good, too, as long as it lasted, but it is a fickle Lord and can easily turn against its former friends. If money was their Lord that would be all to the good but money can be gone as fast as it comes – sometimes faster, and then it turns its backs on its former followers. If some intellectual school of thought was their Lord, then that would be fine until its arguments go out of fashion, or are disproved, and then the source of their identity is shaken. All of these potential Lords might give them a certain meaning in life, a sense of being someone, even a sense of belonging to a group, but in each case there is a struggle to remain 'in' with this Lord and its favour cannot be presumed. St Peter says to these hesitant little churches that the Lord they have chosen to follow is different: he is absolutely reliable, absolutely trustworthy, absolutely clear, transparent and unchanging, absolutely and totally committed to accepting, loving and cherishing everyone, whoever they may be. They can be filled with hope; and they can be filled with hope because they enthrone and reverence the Lord, not some idea, or earthly power, or human individual.

This message of resilience and hope seems very helpful to us in these uncertain days. Looking back a couple of months, when this current crisis was beginning, we could see difficult times ahead and a period of struggle and trouble to get through, but I don't think many of us really understood how bad it would be: how many people would die, how badly the country's economy would be hit, and how long it would all last. I think I had some naïve idea that it might all blow over in a couple of months and then we would go back to normal, but now it is clear that this is not going to happen. Our world has changed, and it will not be going back. What will it look like in the future? We don't know, but we do know it is not going back.

This realization that we are at a point of major change in the way we live is very unsettling. Usually as society changes and develops it is a gradual process, and we have time to accommodate ourselves to each stage of the change on the way, and even to influence some of the changes, but this is completely different. We simply have no idea of what lies ahead of us, and there is very little that we can do to control it. When you don't know where you are heading, and you don't have any control of the direction of travel, it is, to say the least, unnerving. In the middle of this we read St Peter's message of hope. In these uncertain times, many of the lords that people have placed their trust in are looking fragile, or have already collapsed. St Peter reminds us that there is one Lord who is completely reliable and can always be trusted. In these present days, as we put our feet

forward tentatively and move towards a future that we do not know, this is a precious gift. But there is something more important still. As people wander amongst the wreckage of the fallen idols and broken lords, the Church has a unique role to play in helping them to face the future. Postmodern secular Western humanity has no experience of sudden and dramatic social change, but we do; they have no tools to deal with it, but we do. So there is some very important work to be done. What are the things that people are going to be looking for in the new world? How can we help them find them? Whatever it is that people are seeking, everything that can bring fulfillment, can make sense of the world, can fit everything together so that life can start to look good again, all of these things are our field of expertise. Lying there, sometimes quite well hidden, within our Catholic tradition lie all the tools to help people achieve the deepest desires of their hearts. At a time when many of the things that they thought might do that are looking very fragile they need somewhere to turn for hope, somewhere that has experienced catastrophe, and change, and loss, and life re-imagined, and has survived and flourished. That somewhere is us.

As Catholic Christians there is a unique role for us in the emerging new world. We mustn't let ourselves get distracted by trying to make everything look like it used to, or pretending that all is well. The world is very sick, but there is hope. There is a very simple unchanging secure place in the world which we can use as the place from which to navigate, and that is the lordship of Christ. We may need to learn to live much more simply; we may need to get used to a radical resetting of the ideas of prosperity and our expectations of comfort and security; we may need to accept that life is more fragile than it used to be for the long term, and this is hard to do when we have been used to steadily advancing life expectancy; we may need to learn to live in a world that is just more risky and more uncertain. All of these things look very hard, and they are, but they are especially hard if you have no firm place on which to stand. We have such a place, we reverence the Lord Christ in our hearts, and so we have a unique role to play in shaping the new world.