

Message for The Third Sunday of Easter 2020

I don't know how it feels for you, but as I watch programmes on the television that were made before the present lockdown began it now seems quite strange to see people moving around in the easy and carefree way that we all used to take for granted: floods of people walk on city pavements; crowds elbow their way into a pub; well-behaved queues snake their way forwards on the Antiques Roadshow. We used to take all that for granted, but now it seems like another world. In the Gospel reading today we meet two disciples living in that other world. They are walking along the road together, talking; then they meet a mysterious stranger, and they talk and walk together, before – how strange does this now seem to us – they sit down together to eat. Stopping to think about this story like this makes us realize how strange the new way of living that we are experiencing is. The reason I am sitting here in the Passion Chapel at Midhurst is that this image behind me, which is so familiar, is a poignant reminder of how the world was, the world that has changed so much. Mary cradles the body of her son with such tenderness, such deep sadness, such emptiness and pain. But there is comfort for her in being able to hold him and to prepare him for burial, a comfort that so sadly people do not have in this coronavirus world. It seemed good to stop here for a moment and reflect on this, reflect on the double loss that so many people experience at this time: the loss of someone they love made worse than ever because they cannot be close to them before, or after, they have died. Thank God for our wonderful nurses and carers who watch with the dying when no-one else can.

We are all beginning to think of what the world might be like once we can emerge from the present restrictions. We know that it will not get back to normal for a long time, if it ever does. But we are beginning to hope and dream about what it might feel like. There are some things that we long to have back, and perhaps some other things that we are really not missing. However hard we are finding things, there are probably some things about the present days that are making us think about what sort of world we want to go back to. In the collect at today's Mass we pray for 'a renewed youthfulness of spirit', and while in most years those words might trip lightly off our tongues, this year, like no other, we might catch a glimpse of some deep longing, a longing for a better life, for a better world, a way of living that picks up all the good things we have found in these desperate times, as well as holding onto the good things that we really want back: a glimpse of a renewed youthfulness of spirit.

When the risen Lord meets the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, gradually, little by little, he gives them back their hope. 'Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free' they say, downhearted and disappointed. Slowly he leads them through the scriptures, helps them to see everything that has been happening in a new light, so that at last they understand what is the true meaning of what has been taking place. Hope grows where we are aware of something that is missing, something important that we really, really want and we get the exciting sense that it might, after all, be possible. The two disciples had lost their hope, but the risen Jesus helps them to see that all was not lost. The exciting new world that they had seen as possible before Good Friday is not lost

for ever, not gone, not buried. It might, after all be possible. This is Easter Joy: the world that we dream of, the better world, is possible; it is there if we will reach out for it.

When the two disciples and the man they do not yet recognize reach Emmaus, Jesus 'made as if to go on'. It makes you catch your breath at the thought that they might have let him go; they might have turned aside and had a sad meal alone, thinking of what might have been before going back to the old way of life. What a missed opportunity that would have been, what a wasted chance! Thank goodness they didn't let the moment pass, they insisted of grabbing the opportunity and holding on tight.

What if we are at a similar place? What if we are being presented with a great opportunity, a once in the whole of history moment? You may have read a few days ago that only 9% of people said they wanted to go back to life as it used to be before this crisis. The other 91% have sensed that there may be a different way of living. Once we are allowed to go back to normal, or start to go back to something like it, there will be a strong temptation to go back to the familiar old ways. There will be plenty of people with an interest in getting us to consume in the way we always did, and it may be hard to resist that. But now is the time to think about this, to be prepared.

So we need to ask ourselves, what are the new things that we have learned that we really don't want to let go of? Perhaps they are things like simplicity, silence, a connection with the natural world, a slower lifestyle, a connectedness with people far and wide. But also, what are the things that we have lost which we just must have back? Perhaps things like a sense of physical closeness, trust, intimacy, the simple joy of eating together, hugging, singing, meeting and speaking. These two questions: what do we want to hold onto from our new experiences, and what must we reclaim of the old, will help us form the future. They will show us what we really want, and so will help us hope. Wouldn't it be great if we could be opinion-formers here, if we could help the 91% discover what they really long for. Let me know what you think, I would love to hear.