

Message for The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (21/06/20)

When I first sat down in The Presbytery with Alasdair to record a message for the parish at the start of this crisis, thirteen weeks ago, I don't think it really occurred to me that it would all last such a long time, and that such a high cost would be experienced by so many people. At long last, though, it is beginning to look as if we are starting to emerge from the acute phase of the crisis into something a bit more like normality. Of course, we will not know for a long time the real scale of the damage to peoples health, and livelihoods, to the fabric of our society, to our mental wellbeing, to our ability to interact together and relate to one another as social beings. I am sure that the effects of the last few months will be playing out for many years to come.

For now, though, we are in a moment of joy. At last our churches can be open again, and it was wonderful to see the pleasure that it gave so many people to be able to visit the church in Petworth on Wednesday: now they can all be open, at times which you will be able to read on the website and the Newsletter. I am so grateful to all those of you who have volunteered to help as stewards during the times the buildings are open: this is a great gift that we can offer not just to our congregations, but to the whole town. If all goes well within a fairly short space of time we should be able to have Mass again: this may even be one of the last of these messages that I need to record!

In fact the Gospel reading today is strangely appropriate for our present circumstances. Jesus has called and summoned the Twelve Apostles, and now he is giving them some instructions before sending them out to preach and to heal. What I whisper to you in the dark, you must shout from the rooftops. He is saying to the Apostles that they must be fearless and tireless in proclaiming the truth, loudly and for all to hear, BUT before they are able to do that they must be attentive to the voice of the Lord. In the darkness of the night they listen and hear the intimate and loving words of God, spoken into their attentive hearts; in the daytime they proclaim what they have heard. The message that was shared with them is listened to attentively; it is processed and taken to heart; it is applied to their own particular situation, their own particular experience of life, and then it is shouted aloud. The opening of our churches is important, because kneeling here before the eucharistic Lord we are able to listen attentively as he whispers to us his words of compassion, and comfort, and love, and mercy; but also his words of challenge and encouragement, driving and encouraging us, spurring us on to greater and more beautiful lives. We know, of course, that we can pray anywhere. Nothing stops us praying at home, or in the park, or on the bus, or at our desk. But we also know that the place to pray above all others is in the presence of the eucharistic Lord himself: here a window opens up between us and eternity, a window through which we hear the gentle and intimate voice of the one who loves us to the end.

Of course, we know that an open church, powerful resource as it is, is only a step on the road to what we really want. A church without Mass is a strange sort of a church (and Mass has been celebrated in each of our churches during this lockdown time). I know I have said it before, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the church itself is not really the thing that matters. We start by setting aside a space that will serve no useful purpose. In a world that is governed by productivity and usefulness, this is a reminder that a world based solely on usefulness would be by nature inhuman. Into that space we build a symbolic mountain, because mountains are the place where God is met: Moses and the tablets of stone;

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac; the Transfiguration, the crucifixion, the Ascension; again and again the mountain, large or small, is the place where God is encountered, where sacrifices are made. Then onto that mountain we place an altar, because here the sacrifice of Christ by which he gave his one life so that all our lives may be fulfilled is re-presented to us day after day and week after week. In a sense all is then complete, but we enclose the altar in a protective skin that we call a church, fitted out with chair and ambo and tabernacle, and other necessary items to help our devotions.

It is great to have the Church open, but until the altar is buzzing once again with the power of the Mass, with the transforming power of the bread and wine that are themselves transformed, it is only a step on the way. Of course, the altar does buzz every day, and every day I take to that altar all the hopes and dreams, the joys and sorrows, the questions and the searchings that you would have brought to it. But naturally we want more. We want to gather together at the altar. We want to hear the scriptures proclaimed to us by a real, physical person present with us in time and space. We want to hear the Gospel preached; we want to hear the words of Christ spoken, and to witness with wonder and awe the daily miracle in which God keeps for all time and eternity his promise, and gives himself to us in form of bread and wine.

What I whisper to you in the darkness, shout from the housetops in the daylight. The new world is going to be a challenging place, and perhaps even a frightening one. To be ready to face it we need to listen attentively to the words of the God who speaks. We will not know what to say to the world, nor how to say it, until we have listened to the whispers in the darkness. The Lord is waiting for us, and the first light of the Dawn has appeared. The celebration of Mass together is closer by the minute. Praise God!