

## Message for the Fifth Sunday of Easter (May 10<sup>th</sup> 2020)

I've been lucky enough to have a few days off this week, which chiefly means a few days away from the phone and the email, which has been a great boost for me. Four days in Sussex is not quite the four weeks in Georgia that Cathy and I had originally planned, but there we are, such is life!

During this week I was listening to one of my favourite podcasts about books, and the presenters were laughing at themselves after talking about wonderful books and the joy that reading brings because they both said 'but what I really want is to be able to go and visit an art gallery'. And here am I living in the most beautiful Sussex countryside surrounded by the glories of an English Spring, and I find myself thinking how much I would like to travel and watching television programmes set overseas as the next best thing! We are rather ridiculous, as we are never quite satisfied with life, however good it is.

This dissatisfaction with life is indeed ridiculous in a way, but at the same time it contains the seed of something very important. Our dissatisfaction with life is inevitable, because it is a longing for Heaven. Heaven is our true home, it is where we belong, it is where our souls long to be, and anything less is bound to be rather unsatisfying. St Peter writes in today's second reading that we are "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light*". We have been created to sing the praises of God; that is what we are made for, doing that is when we will finally get the sense that all is as it should be, all is well, and anything less will never be enough. Our problem is that we miss the real meaning of that grumbling sense that life has not yielded to us what we long for. We long for an art gallery, and art galleries are great but only insofar as they reveal to us some of the beauty and the truth of what it means to be human; travel is great, but only if it is pointing us to divine perfection, opening up for us again a vision of beauty and the glorious diversity of God's creation. There are so many things that we pursue in the hope that once we have them, all will be well and we can stop searching: contentment will, at last, be ours.

In today's Gospel Philip says to Jesus '*Lord, let us see the Father and then we shall be satisfied*'. He realises that there is more that he needs, more that he wants, but he has failed to see that what he really needs is within his grasp – it is the Lord himself, standing there and speaking with him. Imagine that, you are living with, walking with, talking with the Lord himself, physically present in front of you, but still it is not enough. Like Philip, we know that there must be something more, but we go on looking for it in the wrong places, and missing it when it is staring us in the face.

I have been very lucky this last week to have the chance to spend lots of time reading, and I have been reading a book I have meant to read for years, Thoreau's *Walden*. In the 1840s the young Thoreau goes into some woods near Walden pond, outside Concord in Massachusetts, and builds himself a hut that becomes his home for two years. There he lives alone, feeding himself and finding fuel for his fire, observing with great care the natural world around him.

Near the start of his book he explains why he is doing this, in what are now quite famous words:

*“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”*

There is something rather alarming in that baldly stated anxiety that he might, at the end of his days, discover that he had never really lived at all, that he had missed all the great challenges, joys and opportunities that life offers, and instead had merely existed, like a stone or a rock. As I read those words, listening to the song of the birds that seems so much louder this year in the absence of planes and trains and cars, it occurred to me that this strange and terrible time when so much of normal life is on hold, offers us a chance to do something very similar. Thoreau went to the woods so that his normal comfortable familiar way of living could be totally disrupted, and in that disruption he might learn what life really means. It's a bit like interviewing someone for a job: interesting as their prepared answers may be, the only way to get to the reality is to ask them something that throws them a little off balance, and then hopefully the real person comes to the fore. In this strange time, where so much of normal life has vanished, and even very mundane things like going shopping happen in totally different ways, we also find that we are thrown off balance, and we discover things about ourselves that we did not know before: sometimes those will be good things, sometimes they will be more challenging.

We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, created to sing the praise of God. It is so easy to forget who we are, and what we are here for, and to miss the truths that are staring us in the face, as Philip did in the Gospel. We get caught up in familiar routines, but at the moment all those routines are blown away. Lets make the most of this disruption, lets allow it to hold a mirror up to our souls and lets make sure that we learn the lessons that it teaches us about who we are, and what really matters. Let us use this time to make sure, absolutely sure, that we ourselves don't come to the end of our days and make the horrifying discovery that we never really lived at all.