

Seventh Sunday of Easter: Year A
Holy Ghost & St. Stephen, Shepherd's Bush

24 May 2020

(Acts 1:12-14; 1 Pt. 4:13-16; Jn. 17:1-11a)

There was a meme circulating on social media recently: a picture of Clint Eastwood sat outdoors all by himself, several beers to hand, not a care in the world, perfectly happy with life and the universe. The caption runs: 'You never realise how anti-social you are until there is a pandemic and your life doesn't really change that much.'

People – sometimes members of the same family – have reacted very differently to the experience of the last two months. If not exactly loving it, there are certainly those who are perfectly content with the peace and their own company. Others are finding it incredibly difficult, sometimes close to breaking point. Of course, our personal psychological makeup has got something to do with it. We react very differently depending whether we are introverts or extroverts. We never underestimate the huge pressure some people are under in terms of mental health.

But there are things we can do to help ourselves. Some people are struggling at the moment because they have had all the props knocked away. We failed to realise what a crazy, frenetically busy world we were living in before 23 March. We tried to compensate with yet more activity – consumerism, socialising, constant travel and movement. Suddenly it's stopped. And what is left? ... All that manic activity wasn't good. We had no time to reflect, to internalise, to enjoy, to relate in a meaningful way – to others, to ourselves, to God. And now the brakes have been thrown on.

How is our interior life? Are we happy with our own company? ... To some people that conjures up images of solitary confinement in a prison cell, bare walls, everything exposed under an electric bulb. It's not meant to be like that. Now is the moment to reach into the recesses of our minds, to take down and spend time with the memories of people and places, to turn over ideas and seek new perspectives, to taste the cultural and intellectual goods which have been slowly maturing over the years.

And to know that we are not alone. At the start of this Mass we prayed that we ‘may experience, as He promised, until the end of time, His abiding presence among us.’ Do we experience God’s presence among us? Do we experience the consolation the Psalmist speaks of: ‘The Lord is the light and my help ... The Lord is the stronghold of my life’? If we do, the external circumstances, everything going on in the world at the moment, will never overwhelm us.

If we don’t yet experience that consolation, then let’s do something about it. After Jesus’s Ascension to heaven, his disciples didn’t just sit around feeling sorry for themselves. The Apostles ‘went to the upper room ... [and] joined in continuous prayer.’ We need to go to our upper room. It might be our bedroom, anywhere in the house when it’s quiet and other people aren’t around – or a corner of the garden or a park. The physical location is less important, but we need to join in that ‘continuous prayer.’

‘I don’t know how to’ ... OK. Let’s make a start. First, choose 5 or 10 minutes when we’re not going to be disturbed. And calm down. Come to this as relaxed as we can. Coming with empty hands isn’t a problem. ‘He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty.’¹ It is those who admit their weakness whom God will help. As we approach Pentecost, a quick, ‘Come, Holy Spirit,’ ‘Help me, Holy Spirit,’ won’t go amiss. ‘We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us.’² All prayer to the Father is in the Holy Spirit through Jesus. We are never alone.

Then simply tell it as it is. Say with the Psalmist: ‘Hear my voice when I call.’ Are we anxious, doubting, not coping? Tell the Father. Like any loving parent, He wants to hear from His children. He cares. He wants to hear what we are thinking, feeling, hurting. Don’t be ashamed, don’t be embarrassed. This isn’t therapy. He can help. He is all loving and all powerful. Persevere. Prayer, like everything, becomes easier with practice. Pray and trust; trust and pray. And things will change – for the better.

¹ Lk. 1:53

² Rom. 8:26

To all those loving the lockdown: OK – up to a point. It is good if we are happy and content. But we are not meant to be in perpetual self-isolation. As children of the heavenly Father, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we are created for relationship. This period is unnatural. Don't get too used to it. With the Psalmist, we want 'to live in the house of the Lord ... to behold His temple.' Together, in our churches, praying, receiving the sacraments. Safely, yes – but soon.

Jesus will be faithful to His promise: 'I will not leave you orphans.'