

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 17th May 2020.

Fifth Sunday after Easter.

“If you love me, you will obey my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper who will stay with you for ever. He is the Spirit who reveals the truth about God ... Whoever accepts my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me... I will love him and reveal myself to him.” (St John 14: 15-21)

For weeks now, at both Westminster and Edinburgh, accompanied by senior medical and scientific advisors, each day national leaders have stood before a television camera to give their update on the coronavirus crisis as we have limped through our continuing lockdown. Their reports have been detailed, solemn, respectful. Subjects covered have ranged from the need to stay at home to saving the NHS; from the provision of protective clothing for health and care workers to news of urgent research in discovering a required vaccine. As the latest fatality figures have been given, the virus has been shown to be no respecter of age or circumstance, profession or fitness. Perhaps the most poignant and sad news has been that of the deaths of so many elderly and dependent individuals resident within our nation’s care-homes. The numerical rate of their deaths, in particular, has covered column inches within the daily press and on social media.

We know that death comes to us all eventually. Yet, it is curious how our culture tends to treat death as abnormal, even outrageous, certainly not the inevitable fact that it is. Some doctors will prescribe antidepressants in the days after a loss, as though normal grief following the death of a loved one is a medical condition. And one of the most contentious areas of debate is how a doctor should manage the pleas of relatives for life-prolonging interventions for a patient, particularly when there is no hope and such measures will only cause pain and distress to the person dying.

Initial advice to government regarding the best way to deal with this pandemic met with outrage. The assumption being that transmission would be all but impossible to contain and, so, the aim should be to slow the spread, ensure the NHS is not overwhelmed and, over time, try to reach a state where enough people are immune so that replication of the viral infection would fade away. It was termed, herd immunity. As soon as this was announced, the media demanded that the government should do more. ‘More’ turned out to be near total lockdown – a response that still commands popular support, according to a recent opinion survey. Most of us, it would seem, want rules that will prevent any further deaths.

The problem is that lockdown, per se, will not prevent further deaths. At best, it may slow down the rate of their occurrence. Unless a vaccine is discovered, any relaxation of lockdown may result in further spikes in infections, followed by further lockdowns and so on, until we reach – herd immunity.

If we are to find a way out of this situation, we will need to face up not only to the likelihood of successive waves of infections, but the fact that no rules can ever be devised that will banish death altogether. Until a vaccine is found and globally-produced, if we are all to truly begin living again, we may have to relearn some forgotten or disregarded lessons about how best to walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

Like many colleagues, as a clergyman who has conducted a great many funerals and so has lived close and personal with Death for over forty years, I have learned many important things from her. Death has taught me to hold more closely the people I love;

that there is something so precious about the life we have, even though we tend to take it for granted; and that there is a beauty to the world made more vivid and more electrically alive precisely because it is transient.

In 1994, Melvyn Bragg conducted a memorable interview with the writer Dennis Potter, who was dying with cancer. Memorable because Potter was brilliant, brimming with intellectual energy even though he had less than a few days of life left. Smoking a cigarette and sipping a glass of champagne, Potter made clear he had no interest in a God or religion that offered some cheap way of avoiding death. Instead, he said that his own imminent death enabled him to see, and value, things he hadn't properly seen, or valued, before. These are his words: *"Below my window back home the blossom is out in full. It's white; and looking at it, instead of saying 'Oh that's nice blossom', last week looking at it through the window while writing, I saw it was the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be. I saw it for the first time as it really was. Things are more trivial than they ever were and also more important. And the difference between them doesn't matter to me. It's the nowness of everything that is absolutely wondrous....and boy can you celebrate that'."*

The forty days of Easter are almost over as this week brings us the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday. Within the Christian Church, it's a time of year when we find ourselves reading from what are called the farewell discourses. Conversations that Jesus had with his disciples immediately following the last supper. They are conversations that the gospel writer, St John, places at that moment in time as though Jesus was preparing to leave them. Over the course of the next few days he would be killed and their goodbye would be in tears rather than words.

I cannot imagine the depth of grief so many feel and struggle with as a result of losing their loved one recently. Perhaps they find tears flowing as words evade them. No doubt like you, I feel so deeply for them. But of this I am certain. Death need not be feared. Dennis Potter's words were not an especially religious way of expressing his perspective on his own dying and impending death. But they articulate something that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Maybe we could more determinedly try to let them speak to us. Especially, right now. For the blossom is out now in my garden and so Potter was describing something that many of us can actually see, and experience, at this very time. And wondrous it is.

Prayer:

Ever-loving and ever-present God, be with us in our isolation, be close to us in our distancing, be healing in our sickness, be light in our darkness, be wisdom in our confusions, be all that is familiar when all around is unfamiliar that when our lockdown is eased we may rejoice even more in the wondrous glory of life. As best as we are able, may we celebrate your gift of each new day through the kindness of heart and generosity of spirit we show to those we love and to our neighbours alike. For it is in giving that we receive; and in loving are we blessed.

God of love, hear this prayer for those who are unwell and concerned for loved ones, for all who are already very anxious, for the vulnerable because of underlying conditions, for those in the most at risk to coronavirus categories, for those watching their entire income source dry up and for all who have no choice but to go out to work and for all afraid as they stay at home. Especially for the dying we pray and for all who are bereaved and grieving. Whatever their faith, be their comfort, their strength and their close companion. By your love, hold us all as one that together we may celebrate your goodness to an emerging world, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, and power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.