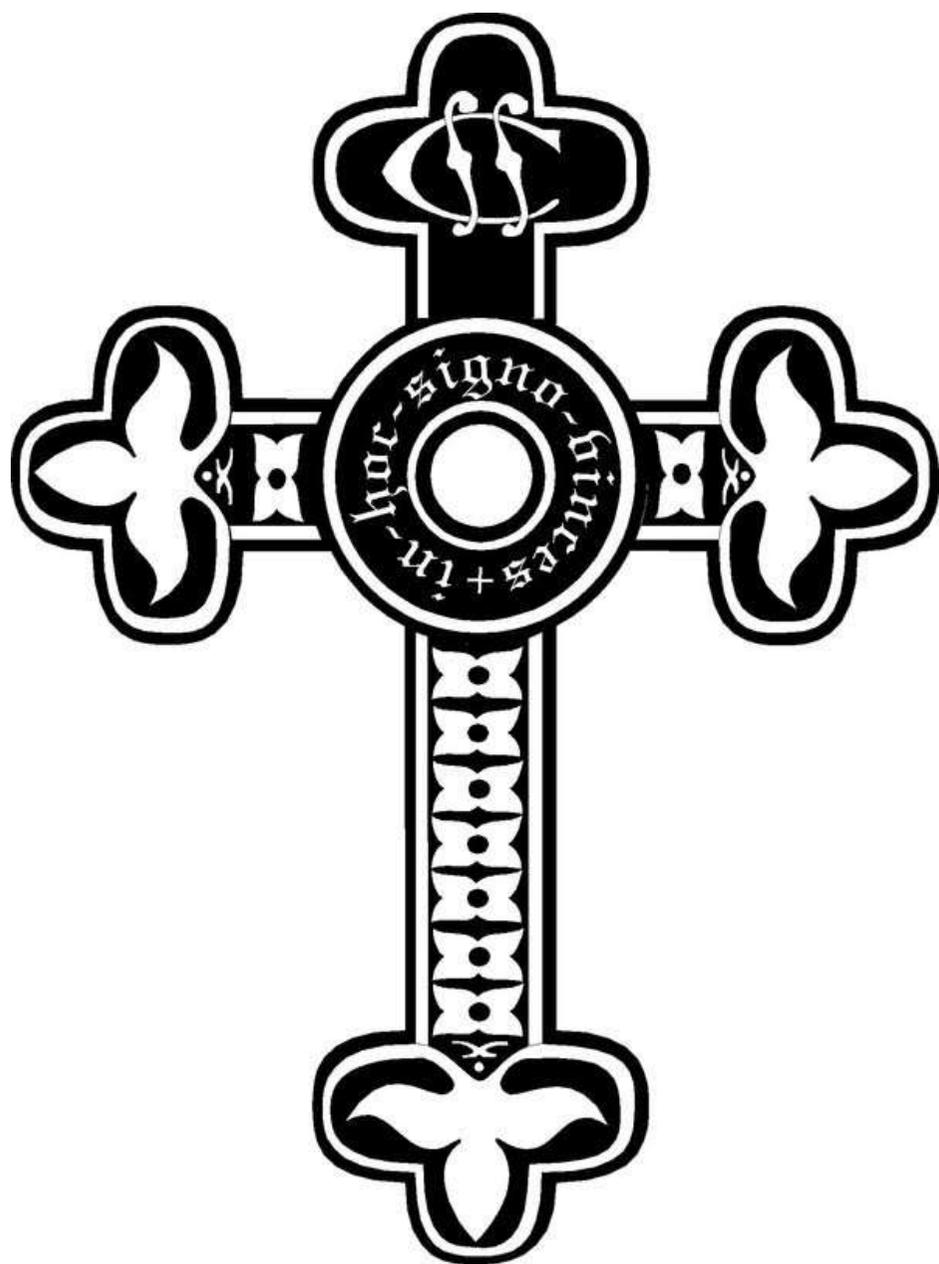


**PREACHING THROUGH
THE PANDEMIC**

**A SERIES OF HOMILIES
BY A PRIEST
OF THE SOCIETY
OF THE HOLY CROSS**



As lockdown began, it became clear that the way in which we worshipped as communities, and the way in which we taught the faith were going to have to change.

We present here a series of homilies by one priest of the Society of the Holy Cross (SSC) who ministers in North London.

In this series he explores through the great Feasts of the Church's year just how the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on our faith.

We hope you enjoy reading them and reflecting upon them.

The Master-General of SSC has kindly given permission for the SSC Cross to be used in this booklet.

Readers are asked to note that this is a publication of The Society, rather than SSC.

A Long Lent

I feel certain that a number of you will have noticed that, apart from one or two very oblique references, I haven't mentioned the present COVID-19 in my on-line homilies to you. That is because I, like you, I expect, am very, very weary of the bombardment of news stories, to the exclusion of anything else, from which we have suffered since lockdown began. We can be certain that, like lockdown itself, there is no certain end to this abundant flow of news stories in sight, and that our immune systems will have to develop resistance to these news stories as much as to the virus itself.

But this week, I have suffered my first direct experience of a dear friend's death, due, as it says on the medical certificate, to the corona virus. I do not intend to spend your time mourning my friend's death with you, for if anyone ever is likely to rest in peace and rise in glory, it will be him, and his hope in his risen Lord's mercy was unending. But the general experience of the virus, and the concentration of so many of the news stories on it, has pushed a subject to the forefront of our human consciousness, and now directly my own, in a way that few of us have experienced, the sombre fact of death itself as a universal affliction.

Death is a subject, which is unfashionable for many, many reasons. We have been conditioned by the customs of the modern world, the glossy advertising, the competition, the relentless rat race of bankers and the stars of reality shows to consider that we are impervious to the general frailty to which our flesh is liable. Huge advances in medical knowledge have meant that illnesses like tuberculosis, measles, smallpox and even AIDS are no longer the death threat that they were. We have been correspondingly careless, thinking, as Eve was encouraged to think by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that the relentless grabbing of human experience would be enough for our eyes to be opened to the knowledge of all good and evil, and that we would become divine. But of course, the serpent was wrong, and death has always been lurking there, the elephant in the room, the only true fact of our

human existence from which we cannot escape. And it is remarkable that the more human beings have tried to ignore this universal fact, the more circumstances seem to arise to remind them of it.

And what if we do not ignore this fact, and manage to contemplate the one true reality of death, what is it we see? Is death just an extinction of human existence? Do our spirits perhaps linger, enfolded into the great Divine Mind with no purpose or personality as the ancient Greeks and Romans and their Asiatic contemporaries thought? Not if we are Christians. The descent of God to become Man in Jesus Christ, and His death and resurrection from the dead which we have just celebrated on Easter Day, points us to another great inescapable fact- that our death, through Him, is inextricably linked to life, the new life of the resurrection. We do not know how we will be resurrected- as so often St Paul gets it right: *"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed.... For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed."* "Easy for Paul" you may casually say, "a man who claimed he saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, who lived at a time when people actually believed in an afterlife." But actually, no, the majority of educated people in the Roman Empire did not believe in the kind of afterlife that we as Christians hope and strive for- one reason why Roman women, servants and slaves needed hope given to their lives, those second class lives which social custom deprived of any real meaning, and so they formed, as many of the hopeless of whatever class or gender still do, the bedrock of Christianity. But they were and still are given hope by the incarnation of God as Jesus, and as one of us.

For Christianity is always the religion of hope, hope for this suffering and bruised world, where the pressures we create for ourselves now drive us in the West down paths which are very often just as restricted and limited as the path of a slave or a servant in the Roman Empire. For the life and death of Jesus Christ shows us God is not a vengeful bruiser, a Mafia boss who demands

total subservience from his subjects. "God" says the Gospel of John, "did not send the Son into the world, to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him." Rather, that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Palm Sunday

If, as we are told, that the Mind of God apprehends and knows all things, one may hope that it is not irreverent to imagine what was in the mind of Christ when He entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. The writer of Matthew's Gospel almost invites us to indulge in that speculation. The first thing we can infer is that Jesus had arranged His parade through the streets of the city, before He even reached it; it was not a spontaneous event, but, one might say, one which was deliberately stage managed by Him. There seems to have been a network of friends in and around Jerusalem, known to Him, but unknown, it seems, to His disciples, upon whom he could rely- perhaps, like Nicodemus, they could not openly declare themselves as followers of His. He had made arrangements with one of them to ride on a donkey and her colt into the city from Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, just as four days later, He would make carefully anticipated arrangements to celebrate the Passover with His closest followers with someone who had room, space and servants in the overcrowded city- although we are not told who that person was.

And if we consider this, we may think that riding in triumph through the streets of Jerusalem, accepting the triumphant acclamations of the crowd as "*the Son of David*", and as "*one who comes in the name of the Lord*", is not characteristic of the Jesus whose ministry in Galilee we have traced up to this point in the Gospels. Yes, He has spoken and healed as one with authority, but I for one always sense in many Gospel accounts that Jesus did not always welcome extended contact with those that followed Him. He tries to escape the attention of the crowd, He notices immediately that someone touches Him, He goes up a mountain to pray and be alone, He urges His disciples not to reveal that He is the Messiah or His predictions of His own death and resurrection, and asks those whom He has healed not to announce His healing abroad.

All this changes once He comes near to Jerusalem. He accepts the cries of the crowd acclaiming Him as Messiah, and He acts out the prophecy of Zechariah as to the manner of His triumphant entry as seated on a donkey and her colt, and arranging for those animals to be available in advance- and the people of Jerusalem, steeped in the oral tradition of the Scriptures, no doubt immediately spotted the allusion. Indeed on that day, only five days before Good Friday, the crowds rejoiced in it; *“When He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’”* And after Palm Sunday, Jesus’s exchanges with His enemies become openly bitter, and even more confrontational; He insults them, and threatens the existence of the Temple itself, and the whole hierarchy of the Jewish religion- they are almost forced by their opponent to make the traitorous arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, and the shabby condemnation to judgement on Good Friday.

Why this change in His presentation of Himself, this almost “going public” of Jesus, that the procession of the first Palm Sunday heralds? Let us not forget the many ways in which the authorities of the Roman Empire could operate against those whom it found convenient to cause to “disappear”- the imprisonment, like the Baptist, in prison for long periods of time, so that people might forget, or the sudden thrust of a knife in a dark alleyway and the tip of a dead body into a convenient well or cistern, the kind of fate plotted by his enemies from which St Paul was constantly seeking escape. For Jesus knew, as He had told His disciples, that His enemies were plotting His death. And for that death to have its universal meaning for the redemption of the sins of the whole world, He had to make it that of a public figure and take place in a public way which could not be forgotten- Jesus could not die unnoticed in obscurity, wretchedly and conveniently, so the volatile crowds of Jerusalem were not agitated. His enemies were forced therefore by divine cunning to justify their actions in

relation to a newly acclaimed celebrity by following a public judicial process, as St Peter reminded them at the first Pentecost: *“This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.”* And so, as we say in the Apostles’ Creed, we believe that *“He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried”* an historical and remembered fact in Time, but which stands outside Time, for us men and for our salvation.

Good Friday

We are all familiar, I hope, with the great artistic representations of Our Lord's Deposition from the Cross. Were my technical skills great enough (and they are not) I could overwhelm you with viewings of these great works of art and devotion, from the dramatic Depositions by Rembrandt and Rubens, the quiet and submissive Pietà of Michelangelo, which stands in St Peter's Rome, or the agonised Deposition of the Flemish master Memling, still in Bruges where it was painted, in which St John simply touches the hair of the dead head of his Master, as His body lies on the ground, a gesture of affection and emotion, which is just simply heart breaking.

All these representations were composed as aids to personal or public devotion, as are the Stations of the Cross, which adorn our churches. As such, their spiritual power cannot be denied, and they have given comfort and inspiration to many. But we should realise that the sometimes extravagant scenes of despair, with Mary of Magdala contorted with grief, Our Lady with her Son lying in her lap, the sword that Simeon had predicted in the Temple would pierce her heart having clearly done so, sometimes with sundry angels mourning and wailing the death of the Christ, are in fact extreme artistic licence. If we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus's death, a much more muted and far less emotional narrative emerges.

That narrative centres around a figure who is not Our Lady, or St Mary Magdalen, or St John, or even the centurion who proclaims as Jesus dies that He was truly the Son of God. Like so many figures in the Gospel story, Joseph of Arimathea, like Simon of Cyrene, the man who helped Jesus carry His cross to Calvary, emerges for a brief but telling moment in the Gospel narrative, a man we are told was a member of the council, who had not agreed to the death of Jesus. The writers of the Gospels of Mark and Luke tell us, he *"was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God."* The

writers of Matthew's and John's Gospels go further than that: Joseph they say was "*also a disciple of Jesus.*" I am with Matthew and John; I think Joseph's devoted service and reverence for the body of Our Lord indicates that he was indeed an actual disciple of Jesus although perhaps he had not declared himself as such. As a man of some standing, he was in a position to retrieve some decency and dignity, from the tragedy of Jesus's condemnation as a common criminal and His terrible death. In that tragedy Jesus had been abandoned by His closest followers. On Good Friday, we may speculate they were in hiding, fearful that they too would be tortured and killed for following their Master.

But Joseph of Arimathea is not like them. His concern is outspoken, immediate and practical. Jewish law provided that those who were crucified had to be buried before the Passover began at sundown,- and if no one else assumed that responsibility, their bodies would be thrown into a common grave reserved for criminals. Time was running short, for this to happen- as we learn from John's account of the breaking of the legs of those who were crucified with Jesus, to cause them to die quickly in greater agony. Joseph braves the criticism of the fellow members of his council, and the might of imperial Rome, by demanding the body of Christ from Pilate. He hastily wraps it in a shroud and buries it in his own grave- marked only by the faithful women, the only followers of Jesus who remained on the scene as the place to which they would come with spices and anointment, with such momentous consequences.

And then Joseph of Arimathea disappears from the Gospel narratives; like the woman who poured expensive ointment over Jesus's feet, he "*has done what [he] could*" - she anointed Jesus for burial, but Joseph actually buries Him.

There are parts of the Christian Gospel, which can sometimes feel overwhelming in its demands on those that follow Christ. We are

commanded to take up our cross, and follow Him; we are commanded to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. How can we do these things? Some part of the answer to that question is that, every waking hour of our lives, there will always be opportunities, to do what we can, to honour Christ and His Gospel. But we must be brave, not fearful like the disciples at the Crucifixion and seize those opportunities, as Joseph of Arimathea was brave and seized them. There can be no fear in this, even in these difficult days, for as the First Epistle of John reminds us, *“there is no fear in love.. and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”* But let us always remember that perfect love, as that writer also reminds us, *“casts out fear.”*

Easter

One of the reasons that it is difficult for those who tend to disbelieve the truths of the Christian religion is that the accounts of Our Lord's life in the four Gospels are clearly accounts of a life and a personality actually lived. The Gospels are not a documentary account of that life, and- as has been endlessly pointed out by New Testament scholars for many decades now- there are sometimes inconsistencies in their accounts, which are difficult to reconcile. There's a game of "Chinese whispers", which some of you may know in which a sentence is whispered to a number of people in succession, and which inevitably ends up with the last person as something quite different to the sentence which began the chain. That game should make us wary of seizing on the differences in the narrative of the Gospels as evidence that the whole story of Jesus is a fabrication by peasant fishermen, one which they invented to get over their disappointment that the man whom they had hoped to be the Messiah had in fact suffered a criminal's death. Such a devilish scheme, you would have thought, would have ensured that there would be no such inconsistencies.

And what I think shines through especially, in all the Gospel narratives, is something that would have taken considerable literary artistry to achieve, something probably outside the capacity of any ancient classical author of the early Roman empire to attain. For them, the elements of human personality interfered with the heroic virtues they hoped to instil in their readers; the words Suetonius attributes to Nero when he is preparing for suicide, "*Oh what an artist dies in me!*" are meant to indicate his vanity and lack of fitness to be an emperor. One of the unique characteristics of the Gospels is that they portray their hero as a very human being and that that humanity is part of His heroism; He is abusive to His enemies, He likes being alone, He is moved and distressed at the death of His friend Lazarus and the grief of Lazarus's sisters. In the last week of His earthly life, there is almost a neurotic urgency to His utterances, brought on by the

foreknowledge of His death; He is deeply sarcastic when He spars with the Pharisees and the Sadducees; He is emotional in the Garden of Gethsemane; He is almost sullen in His refusal to answer Pilate or the High Priests when they question His mission and His identity; He veers from the despair of *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"* of Mark's Gospel, to the more majestic *"It is finished"*, His last words on the Cross in John's.

And yet all four Gospels show this mysterious and distinct change in Jesus's personality after His resurrection. It is so different, that very often Jesus is not recognized immediately as Jesus, by His two disciples on the road to Emmaus, or by Mary Magdalen in the garden of the Resurrection tomb or by His fishermen disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Gone are the long passages of preaching- in their place are short, grave, impassive statements and instructions, *"Feed my sheep"*, *"Peace be with you"* or sometimes just a single word or action: *"Mary"* or the breaking of bread at Emmaus. If the Resurrection of Jesus is just wishful thinking by His followers, you might have thought that the Gospel writers would have wanted to depict the post resurrection Jesus as continuing to behave as He had before His crucifixion. But no, He appears mysteriously and just as mysteriously disappears, He shows even greater calm, majesty and authority in His behaviour; by the Sea of Galilee, His followers don't even dare to ask who He is- they just realise it is Him. Jesus does not even perform miracles, for His resurrected self is the only miracle that counts. The tensions and uncertainties of Holy Week are dissolved- for both Jesus and His followers.

And why, we latter day Christians may ask, are those tensions resolved? *"Christ"* as St Paul says, *" is the first fruits of them that slept"* The changes in Christ's personality after the Resurrection tell us something about the nature of the resurrected life that awaits all of us; we will remain ourselves, but somehow not ourselves. St Paul's own witness to the Resurrection is very consistent with the

Gospel narrative-“*for we shall be changed, changed utterly*” , words which the Anglo-Irish poet W B Yeats adapted for his poem on the Easter uprising, in which “*a terrible beauty is born*”. But Yeats’s “*terrible beauty*” is a secular political one; for the Christian, the “*terrible beauty*” of the Resurrection is one in which the disharmony and discord in our souls are ironed out. The promise of the Resurrection is a beacon in which our real selves are illuminated- for the first time and in Eternity.

The Road to Emmaus

This week we continue to celebrate the glorious Resurrection of Our Lord on Easter Sunday, and our readings at Mass have duly reflected that. On Wednesday, the Gospel reading for the day was the story of the two of Jesus's disciples who were travelling on the road to Emmaus after Good Friday. You will recall the story- how they encountered a stranger on the road, to whom they told the sad story of Jesus's trial and death, and how they had heard that some women at Jesus' tomb that very morning had seen "*a vision of angels*" who had told them He was alive.

The stranger explains to them that this had all been foretold by Moses and the prophets. He joins them at the wayside inn at which they were staying, and during the breaking of the bread over supper reveals Himself as Jesus; and disappears from their sight. The two disciples return to Jerusalem; and hear that Jesus has appeared to Simon Peter. So, the stage is set for Jesus to appear to all His disciples in the Upper Room, and declare their mission to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations.

The story of the journey to Emmaus is one of my favourite stories in all the Gospels. It is full of small personal details, which only a master story teller like the writer of Luke's Gospel could master in such a short space- the disciples looking despondent, when they are asked by the stranger what they were discussing, the almost Socratic dialogue between Jesus and the two men, in which they place the facts of the last two days before Him. Their reaction to His response- their hearts, as Luke puts it to "*burn[ing]*" within them on the road- with excitement, or irritation, hope, or is it all three?- and the pretence of Jesus to walk on, when the two men reach their destination- knowing of course, that they would wish Him to stay with them, and hear more. And -perhaps the most telling detail of all- the fact that the two disciples do not at first recognise Jesus; it is only when He repeats the breaking of the bread, which He had first done only three days before at the

institution of the Eucharist in the Last Supper, that they know Him.

This failure at first to recognise the risen Lord recurs several times in the Resurrection story. Mary Magdalene thinks He is the gardener; Peter and his fishing companions on the Sea of Galilee only recognise Him as "*the Lord*" after the miraculous haul of fishes in the morning after a fruitless night's search for a catch. Doubting Thomas famously denies his fellow disciples' stories until he sees for himself the wounds of Jesus's resurrected body. I think the Road to Emmaus story is probably trying, within the space of a few short verses, to tell us, the reader, something about the journey that every Christian believer can take, today as yesterday, when he or she first encounters the Jesus story.

We can after all no longer today assume that the majority of people believe in the Christian message, let alone God. For them, at best, if Jesus exists in their thinking at all, He is an inspired prophet, perhaps in the words of Cleopas, one of the Emmaus travellers, "*the one to redeem Israel*", a spiritual leader who managed to get on the wrong side of the religious authorities, and suffered a cruel death for His presumption. But we may learn, if we go deeper into the Jesus story, that He is the point to which the hopes, not just of Israel, but of the world were pointing, the final goal of the unique dispensation and covenant which the people of Israel, alone among the peoples of the ancient world, had received, of the one true God, benevolent and faithful to His people. Christianity, after all, is an historical religion, rooted in fact, time and place, and without being rooted in a particular background of history, a particular time, and a particular place, the Incarnation of God as Jesus has no meaning.

And so it is only when we see the fact of the resurrected Lord staring us in the face, that we will see Jesus Himself as He truly is in the words of Doubting Thomas, "*My Lord and my God.*" That

journey of ultimate recognition may have its moments of despondency and doubt, as it had for those who travelled to Emmaus on that first Easter Day. But all Christians are travellers on the road to Emmaus. Especially at Easter tide, we should not forget the end of that journey, when the glorious fact of the risen Lord is recognised by those that believe in Him, with the stunning realisation that He has, after all, been walking beside us on our journey, all the time.

Pentecost

There has been a lot of comment in all the media about the success or otherwise of the streaming of services by our churches. But Pentecost reminds us that there was a time, in the very very early days immediately after Our Lord's Ascension into Heaven, that the renewed confidence of His disciples spent itself simply in prayer. But Jesus had not left them in order for them to dedicate themselves like the Essenes who lived in the desert with only the Dead Sea Scrolls for company; they were to prepare for the Great Mission with which they had been entrusted, to bear witness to the message of Jesus Christ *"in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Their community prayer life in the upper room at that time was private; Luke's Gospel tells us that *"they were continually in the Temple, blessing God"*, but then they were not actively fulfilling their divinely-given mission- they were clearly waiting for the right moment.

The clue to that "right moment" lies in the fact the mission of the Church begins actively, on the day of Pentecost itself. Peter and his fellow disciples become after that day unstoppable, by the elders of the Sanhedrin or anyone else, in their preaching, baptising and healing ministry. In Judaism, the day of Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Divine Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, accompanied by the majesty of thunder and fire, indicating the presence of God. So, on that first Whitsunday, the Holy Spirit comes *"like the rush of a violent wind....and divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them."* It is a much tougher, more majestic, even violent image than the previous image of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. He appears at Jesus's baptism, for example *"like a dove"*. That image does not always do justice, to my mind, to the Majesty of the Third Person of the Trinity, *"consubstantial, co-eternal"* with the Father and the Son, as the hymn has it.

"The majesty ! what did she mean ?" asks Gerard Manley Hopkins in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" of the cry of the drowning nun. The Majesty of the Holy Spirit is simply this, as Jesus made clear to His disciples in His post Resurrection appearances. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, we, all of us, are not prepared or even able to fulfil the mission of ourselves as the Church to go out and proclaim the Good News of Jesus. Without it, we are not prepared or able to propose that news to an unbelieving and scoffing world. Jesus had already breathed upon the core remnant of His disciples the all important power of the Holy Spirit to forgive sins. Without repentance and that forgiveness, as Jesus had emphasised to all those He healed in His earthly mission, His message was worth nothing. But the day of Pentecost marks a further stage in its development. With that rush of a violent wind, and the descent of tongues of fire, Christianity moves publicly centre stage to the international Mediterranean world and has never left it. The *"Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia"* and all the rest, could hear and receive the word of Jesus in their own languages. That is a powerful symbol of the fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit had given the disciples the ability to communicate the Christian message to others to the far ends of the world. So the Holy Spirit is not just *"the Comforter"* in the words of the *Te Deum*; He is also *"the Communicator"*.

And we should not think that this gift is merely historic. If we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, we do not, like Doubting Thomas, need to see the nails in Christ's hands or feet, or the wound in His side, for the Holy Spirit works throughout time, and in eternity; He is the presence of the resurrected Christ within us, enabling us to achieve all kinds of marvels if He wills them, as all kinds of saints, and sinners too, have shown down the centuries. At my ordination, the Bishop asked his candidates, above all, to *"pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit"*, a prayer followed by the intoning of the ancient hymn *"Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire"*. Our souls must continue to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, if only

that in turn we too may inspire others with the promises of Christ's message of peace, love and hope.

St Paul

This week, as lockdown continues, I have taken my cue from one of the readings from Tuesday's weekday Mass, the story of St Silas and St Paul in prison, and the miraculous delivery from their chains as a result of an earthquake. The readings for Eastertide are regularly taken from The Acts of the Apostles, our primary biblical source for the life of St Paul apart from his letters. And it struck me as I read this week's reading- of which more in a minute- how many times we read about Paul being flogged and being put in prison. It is almost as if the author of Acts is telling us, "*This is what it is like to be a missionary of the Gospel; you preach the Gospel, you upset people, and you suffer for it.*" Like his divine Master, St Paul is always preaching, and incurring the anger of people, who lie in order to achieve their political ends. In Tuesday's reading, Paul has cured in Philippi a slave girl of the gift of divination. Her owners, furious at the loss of income, bring Paul and Silas before the magistrates, telling them that they were preaching "*customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.*"

Acts doesn't go into detail, but it is likely of course that the slave girl's owners were referring to St Paul's preaching of the divinity and kingship of Christ, above any other person, even the divine Emperor. And just like the crowd and Pilate at Jesus's trial, the fear of the magistrates at not being seen to uphold the imperial authority, means that they take the easy way out, and have St Paul and St Silas flogged, and put into prison. And don't let us underestimate the horror of a Roman flogging. Those of you who have watched Mel Gibson's powerful film, "*The Passion of the Christ*" will have seen the hideous pain and cruelty of that punishment. In Jesus's case, His pain, terrible as it was, was ended by His death on the cross, but St Paul and St Silas had to face the horror of being thrown into a common prison, their wounds uncared for, to face the long hours of a hot, cramped and painful night.

And then- a miracle. An earthquake in the middle of the night turns the building of the prison upside down, and St Paul and St Silas's chains were released, and the doors of the prison were flung open. When the jailer sees this, he knows what will happen. Such was the cruel Roman regime under which he lived, the authorities would have held him responsible if any prisoners entrusted to his care had escaped. He would most likely have suffered a violent flogging and a cruel death. He draws a sword to kill himself, despair having entered his soul.

And then- another miracle. St Paul maybe hears the ominous rush of the blade being drawn from its sheath; or sees its glint in the gloom. "*Do not harm yourself, for we are all here*" he cries.

What a huge contrast this one incident gives us! On the one hand, the unthinking cruel indifference of Rome, and the despair, which was ultimately the only legacy its harsh proud regime left to its humblest followers. On the other, the compassionate cry of Paul, who gave up his opportunity to escape, like St Maximilian Kolbe in Auschwitz, to assist that soul in despair-and seemingly convinced his fellow prisoners to do the same- he doesn't cry "*We are both here*" but "*We are all here*". And, not surprisingly, the jailer is converted, with his household.

So we see in this one incident a tremendous example of why and how Christianity took over the world, and defeated the old classical gods. Like the Roman authorities themselves, the classical gods were remote, aloof from the doings of men. But Jesus, the Man-God, is constantly urging us to follow His pattern, His way, and become like the God whose Son He was. And that way was and is the way of Love, not the Love of a sentimental Hollywood film, but the Love that challenges us to engage with the world, understand it, and do it good at all times, even when that world is estranged from it, and even when that engagement is at odds with our own self-interest, hard as it may be. It is a challenge that Christ

still throws down to us today, as He did to Paul on the road to Damascus. "*Remember my chains*" writes Paul to the Colossians- in his own hand. So Paul's chains, a symbol of civic misery and disgrace, become for him and us a badge of honour, no less than the "tree" on which Jesus died.

St Peter

The ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood traditionally held around Pentecost have been deferred by the bishops to the autumn; sadly it seems as if we will not be celebrating the feast day of these mighty heroes of the Church in the due splendour which they deserve. But perhaps the compilers of the readings for Mass in Pentecost encourage us to think more carefully about these two saints, whose doings are so carefully set out for us in the Acts of the Apostles- and in this homily, I'd like to share with you some thoughts about St Peter.

St John Henry Newman wrote: *"Here below, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often"* or, as he put it another way in his spiritual autobiography, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, *"Growth is the only evidence of life."* In the accounts of the early Church contained in the New Testament, there are only two figures of whom we have sufficient narrative detail to apply Newman's maxim- St Peter and St Paul. Of the two, if I had to make a choice, I'd say it was St Peter to whom we might look to justify Newman. Consider Peter when we first encounter him in Luke's Gospel. He is traditionally described as a humble fisherman. I am not so sure about the "humble" bit- he owns a boat, he has a house big enough to accommodate his sick mother in law, and business partners in the lucrative fishing trade on the Sea of Galilee. He is a senior figure- in St John's Gospel, he turns to his fellow apostles after the excitement of the Resurrection appearances, and announces he is going fishing- and the other disciples promptly follow his lead, eager, perhaps like Peter eager to go back to something "normal" after the heightened emotional drama of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

For this Peter clearly has a volatile and emotional side, for all his business acumen as a fisherman. He refuses to have his feet washed by Jesus, he starts cursing and swearing when accused by the serving girl in the house of the High Priest of being Jesus's

follower, he yatters on at the Transfiguration about building tabernacles to Elijah and Moses because he doesn't understand what he has just seen. He impulsively cuts off the ear of the servant of the High Priest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he suffers nothing less than a mini nervous breakdown when he realises, when the cock crows, that he, like Judas, has betrayed his Master: "*The Lord turned and looked at Peter*" is I think one of the saddest sentences in the Gospels.

But it is a measure of Jesus's own insight into the hearts of men, that He chooses this flawed individual to be His disciple and the leader of his "*little flock*" after His Ascension. The intuitive emotional side of Peter's character give him the insight to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah and to confess his unconditional love for Jesus at the lakeside in Galilee after the Resurrection even though we are told that, characteristically, he feels rather hurt at the Lord doubting him; his practical side enables him to lead the early Church in Jerusalem, organising food banks and services, converting, preaching and healing.

For as I said in my last homily, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter becomes "*almost unstoppable.*" He is changed completely from the frightened, confused figure, who collapsed with remorse outside the house of the High Priest the night of Christ's trial. From being a confused, impulsive individual, not always reading situations correctly, he becomes clear, decisive, preaching to the elders of the Temple, refusing to accept their orders to cease the mission given them by Christ to preach to all nations. The Acts of the Apostles is mysterious about what happens to Peter after his release by an angel from prison. The narrative of tradition, however, tells us that he went to Rome, and was martyred in the persecution of Nero.

All this is a record of what the Holy Spirit does. If we listen to His voice, He changes lives, and changes them often. He energises us

so that our obvious failings become our distinct virtues, and leads us into paths of which we could never have dreamed- He led Peter the failed disciple to be the first Pope. We should never, ever be afraid of that call to change, even if we do not know where it will lead us, so that if Our Lord ever looks at us, as He did at Peter, we will not be ashamed to look Him in the Face.

“You did laugh’

The Ministry of the Word, which we celebrate every time we say Mass, in advance of the ceremonies of the Eucharist itself, has perhaps made us over solemn about our response to the words of Scripture. One of the great legacies of the Protestant Reformation is that great reverence for the Word of God which so many of its great heroes and translators showed to it, from Tyndale to Luther and the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible.

However, we ought really to read the Bible, not only as a source of reverent revelation, but also as a wonderful source of stories. And it does not take a great deal of imagination to realise that the triumphant story of Our Lord’s life, death and resurrection in the New Testament, would have little resonance or historic validity, if it were not that that story is preceded in the Old Testament by a similar story of triumph; the triumph of the people of Israel over their enemies and their coming into the Promised Land in accordance with the promises of their God. They too, like us Christians, are people who are promised salvation and given it through the infinite mercies of God. Their story, like the Christian story, is one of hope overcoming despair, and restoration to God’s graces after falling away, time and time again. This is why the heroes of the New Testament, and its writers, emphasise time and time again, the Jewish heritage of the promises of the Gospel- Mary sings of it in the **“Magnificat”** - *“He protects Israel, his servant, remembering His mercy, the mercy promised to our Fathers, to Abraham and his sons for ever”*. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, sings of those promises in the **Benedictus**: *“So His love for our forefathers is fulfilled and His holy covenant remembered. He swore to Abraham our father to grant us that, free from fear, and saved from the hands of our foes, we might serve Him in holiness and justice all the days of our life in His presence.”* Compelling, therefore, as the Gospel narratives are, we are missing “half the story”, if we read them without constantly reminding ourselves of the backdrop of the Jewish narrative of salvation which precedes them.

And any narrative, like any good novel, has to have considerable variety and action, to engage the attention of its readers. There is certainly a lot of that in the Old Testament- together with much else of course- but there is another customary literary element that I think we tend to overlook, in that due reverence for sacred Scripture which I have mentioned. That is humour, and we find it even in the most solemn moments of Biblical drama. In Genesis, we are told that Abraham has been selected by God to be the ancestor of a multitude of nations, - this despite the fact that his wife Sarah is barren. *"Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child?'"* But Abraham is not alone in his laughter. The angels of God being the precursor of the Trinity, visit Abraham and his wife. *"Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.'" And, like her husband Abraham, Sarah "listening at the tent entrance" also laughs to herself, but she is overheard. This time, the Lord does not take this questioning of his Divine plan lightly: "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for me?'"*

And, to give Sarah her due, she realises that she has over stepped the mark, but she over compensates in her response: *"But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh' for she was afraid."* How much of the dramatic frailty of humanity in the face of God's promises is contained in those words! How stern, but ultimately generous, is the Lord's response to that frailty: *"Oh yes, you did laugh"* - setting, you may say, the record straight, as the justice of the Lord always does.

I cannot help thinking that the author of Genesis intended us to smile at Abraham's and Sarah's incomprehension. It is so reminiscent of those times when every soul has challenged the promises of God, and made excuses for its own inadequate

response to them. And of course, Christians, knowing the rest of the story, will always contrast the initial cynicism of Abraham and Sarah with another female's response to the message of another angel, giving his equally astonishing news. But we are told she- the promised Mother of God- did not laugh. "*The Almighty works marvels for me...*" "*..let it be with me according to your word*". No cynical laughter there, but I for one am convinced that, when the sons of God in the heavens heard it, they "*shouted for joy.*"

The Lord Provides

In the last few meditations that I have given on YouTube, I have talked quite a lot about how we should, in the words of the Psalmist, “*rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him.*” I have looked at the lilies of the field, and our Lord’s advice that, taking them as our example, we should not “*worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it.*” I have spoken in that context, of the corrosive effects of worry and anxiety, understandable as they are at the present time. Last week, I looked at the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how, failing to “*rest in the Lord*” they both, to begin with, disbelieved with embarrassed laughter the spoken promise of God that they would in old age have a son that would be the foundation of the nation of Israel.

And to show that even patriarchs of the Old Testament are capable of learning from their experience, this week I thought I would conclude this series of talks, by contemplating the great story of Abraham and the sacrifice- or so he thought- of “*his only son*” Isaac, the result of that wonderful promise which had been made to him and his disbelieving wife. It is a great story because it shows that Abraham has through experience learned to be utterly obedient to the will of God, just as Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was utterly obedient to the will of God, and as we still say, in the words of the Lord’s Prayer “*Thy will be done.*” It is a very difficult lesson for anyone to learn, especially for us in the modern world, who have been taught to shape and mould experience and life to our own wishes and desires, and stand opposed to anyone or anything that stands in our way.

But Abraham does not stand in the way of the desires of God. “*Take your son’, God said...and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain I will point out to you.*” And Abraham complies without protest with His instruction, and takes the boy, and is on the point of killing him, when, as we know, God intervenes. Abraham has learned, as he has previously told

Isaac, *"God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."* The early Church saw these words as foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. But they speak too of the absolute trust that Abraham has learned to have in the promises of God. You may remember that I have said that we should learn to live, move and have our being in the providences of God- and it is no accident that the word *"provide,"* with its echoes of plentifulness and generosity, and *"providence"*, stem from the same verbal root. To emphasise the point, the author of Genesis tells us that Abraham called the place where he so nearly sacrificed his son, *'The Lord provides'*, and so, he goes on to tell us *"as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."* The author of Genesis does not stop there . He continues, in the words of God to Abraham: *"Because you have done this, and not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore."* Just think what those words must have meant to a man, who only some few years before, had expected to have no heir at all to his flocks and possessions ! And so Abraham is our pattern of faith, just as Christ is our pattern of faith, both believing in the providences of God, and that there will always be an ultimate reward. And that is that Kingdom which spreads right across the world like the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, a Kingdom begun and existing, not by our own efforts, but by the dispensation of God.

That is why our Lord emphasises to those whom He heals, that their faith, has made them whole and why in his own home town, *"he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief."* But we should never be tempted to think of our belief in God as merely a bargain; the greater test is when, at the present time, things are not going right for us, or when God asks of us, as He did of Abraham, what seems too much for our human condition to bear. That is why we should always remember the words as the ship was sinking on the Sea of Galilee: *"Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid."*

The Holy Ghost

When I was at prep school on the Isle of Wight, our hymn singing for Morning and Evening Prayer was prepared by one of our piano teachers, who rejoiced in the name of Mr Toogood. The volume from which Mr Toogood took the hymns we learned was the old *"Hymns Ancient and Modern"*. He was not an *"English Hymnal"* man, which he must have thought too "High"; I dread to think what he might make of some modern collections of hymns which have superseded those two volumes in Anglican worship.

We never were at school at Christmas or Easter, so the festal hymns that I vividly recall being intensively prepared by Mr Toogood were those for what were then called "Whitsun" and "Trinity Sunday". The Isle of Wight retained then, as it still does to some extent, some echoes of its Victorian glories, and some part of them still resonated in Mr Toogood, an "Islander" all his life. In no greater way was this more true, than the swooning way in which Mr Toogood, rather unusually, sang the hymns he chose for us. It is not a hymn that is sung very often these days, but *"Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost"*, with words by Bishop Christopher Wordsworth of Lincoln is the one that I especially remember being the subject of Mr Toogood's urgent and frantic conducting, with its constant imprecations of Love, and its qualities. *"Love, than death itself more strong, Therefore give us Love"* sang Mr Toogood, with meaning and passion in front of us boys, as if he was addressing a young lady in Victorian ringlets, rather than a beat up old upright piano in an ink stained and blotting paper littered school room somewhere outside Ryde.

*"Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,
Taught by Thee we covet most,
Of thy gifts at Pentecost,
Holy heavenly Love"*

ran the first verse of the hymn, my first encounter with the concept of the Third Person of the Trinity, and His gifts. The other gifts were something that I wondered about, even then- I could quite see why I should covet Love more than the tongues of fire which had settled on the heads of Jesus's disciples at Pentecost, and which seemed very much at odds with the rigorous fire drill with which we practised at school, almost as much as the rigorous singing of hymns, and I didn't covet that particular gift at all. It was only later that I came to know that Bishop Wordsworth had sadly misrepresented and simplified the gifts of the Holy Spirit; love was not in fact, a gift of the Holy Spirit at all, but is a result of the exercise of the gifts that He bestowed. Whether Mr Toogood ever realised this, I do not know; I suspect he did not, any more than he knew that the traditional number of the Holy Spirit's gifts were seven in number.

The classic number of seven comes from St Thomas Aquinas. Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety and Fear of God, are the seven qualities which Aquinas himself distilled from the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah: "*And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him; the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*" I'd like each of you slowly to consider, one at a time, what these words mean to you: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of God. Do some of those words seem to be describing the same quality- and if so, how might you distinguish between them Can you apply any of them to your present life, or even to your past life? And how might you apply those qualities in your life, in the future?

And remember as you think, that considering the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is of supreme relevance to any kind of Christian life. They are relevant, not least because they are of real help in the practical business of Christian living in a way that the benchmark commandments of Our Lord perhaps sometimes are not. And it is

precisely because of that help and assistance that the Holy Spirit was sent. *"When the Spirit of truth comes"* says Our Lord in St John's Gospel, *"He will guide you into all the truth."* And, as you consider, you may remember the words of a greater hymn in praise of the Holy Spirit. *"Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire, And lighten with celestial fire"* - a translation from the Latin by another Anglican Bishop, John Cosin of Durham. They are words sung at ordinations, coronations and confirmations, and at the beginning of a papal consistory to elect a new pope. But those grand events are of no greater importance to the workings and gifts of the Holy Spirit than His workings and gifts breathed and inspired within each Christian soul, and lighting with celestial fire the way forward to eternity.

