

READINGS FOR SUNDAY 17th MAY 2020 (6th SUNDAY OF EASTER)

TO AN UNKNOWN GOD ACTS 17:22-31 and

JESUS PROMISES THE HOLY SPIRIT JOHN 14:15-21

Acts 17:22-31

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

'Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.'

John 14:15-21

'If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.'

REFLECTION

Do you prefer to look back to the past, or look ahead to the future? Most of us, at some time, want to know where we are going in the future. Whether or not we realize it, we are looking for something we can count on to save us. We are really looking for God.

This week the Government tried to show us where we might be going in the battle against the Coronavirus. But their plans are all 'conditional'. Nobody knows for certain what will happen and so there is a lot of anxiety.

Paul addressed some similar circumstances in Athens in A. D. 50. at the Areopagus. He looked around the area, which was overflowing with people who were deeply religious, but never finding what they were looking for. They were soul-starved people and Paul noticed that there was even an altar in the city dedicated to "an unknown god."

He was greatly distressed by all the idols he saw in the city of Athens and the heaviness and emptiness that it brought these people despite all their attempts to be "religious." The people of Athens were considered to be more "religious" than people in any other area. They would spend all their time sitting around discussing any new ideas or trends that came down the road. Yet it didn't get them anywhere.

The mood of today's gospel reading is also very sad. Jesus is about to leave his disciples and friends. This particular scripture is a part of the long dialogue Jesus had with his disciples as he prepared them for his death, resurrection, and ascension. (*This year we celebrate Ascension Day on Thursday 21st May*).

By listening to the readings for the last couple weeks, we see that the followers of Jesus are beginning to feel separation anxiety; the man they gave up everything to follow is about to leave them. They don't really understand what is going to happen to Jesus, what is going to happen to them, and where they were going to go. Many of the disciples left their homes, their wives and families and their livelihood to follow Jesus. They no longer had a source of income and were far away from the security and comfort of home.

When we are about to lose something that is valued, someone close, or someplace familiar, we worry, become disagreeable or feel depressed. That is only human. I am sure that the disciples were feeling all of these – some kept it to themselves, and others, like Thomas, questioned and questioned. The mood around Jesus and the disciples must have been pretty despondent.

Today there are many people, all around the world, who are feeling despondent in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. Some will have lost a close family member or friend, whether through Covid-19 or some other cause. Their bereavement and grief may have been made worse by the restrictions of the lockdown, especially not been able to receive a loving hug or touch of support.

Most of us are missing being able to meet with family and friends. Not knowing when the restrictions will be eased adds to our anxiety.

A story is told about an Army sergeant in the Second World War who was caught on the beach by German artillery and managed to save himself by jumping into the water. While improving his position with a trench shovel, he came upon an ornate crucifix. Two hours later, in the midst of still another German artillery barrage, a Chaplain rolled into the water beside him. The Sergeant held up the muddy crucifix that he had been clutching for dear life since discovering it, and turned to the startled chaplain and said, "My God, Sir, am I glad to see you! How do you MAKE THIS THING WORK?" (*source unknown*).

The problem with mere religion is that we don't know how to make it work. This is evident everywhere we turn to in our culture today, as well as in Paul's day. In our reading from Acts, Paul is telling them, and us, "You try so hard to be religious through your own efforts, but it is not working for you." So how do we make it work?

Well, Jesus left the disciples with a promise. Jesus told the disciples that God would leave them a helper, a 'paraclete' – a word that means comforter, advocate or one who walks with you. So the disciples were not left alone. Neither are we.

- The Holy Spirit is with us.
- That still small voice that comes into our hearts when we are the most overwhelmed or confused; that is the Holy Spirit.
- When you are the most befuddled and lost for answers, and it comes to you – that is the Holy Spirit.
- When we are despondent, our hearts are broken and we don't think we can go on, it's the Holy Spirit that fills our hearts with love and encouragement that lets us know we can.
- When we see someone hurting or upset, needing comfort and we don't know how to help, suddenly the right words begin to come, and we find solace – that is the Holy Spirit.
- When we look in the faces of our children or grandchildren, when we are overcome with the beauty of springtime, or the twinkling of a starry sky or the touch of a loved one's hand, that is the Holy Spirit reassuring us 'I am always with you', even to the ends of the earth.

The Holy Spirit walks with us, leading, guiding and supporting us on our journey. The Holy Spirit may come in the form of a person or a spirit. How many times, when you are at your lowest, does someone suddenly appear and help lift your spirits? God is at work, comforting, encouraging, and loving us.

Jesus goes on to say that he “will not leave us as orphans”. No matter how alone we feel, we are not alone. We are a member of the family of Christ, protected eternally by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

No matter what happens, whatever goes wrong, how remote God seems from us, Jesus assures us that we have a paraclete, a helper in the Holy Spirit that will always be with us. If we love God and love our neighbours, and try to keep his commandments, Jesus and the Holy Spirit will always be with us. We will always be a part of the family of Christ.

So when you start to feel despondent, or lonely, or anxious, remember that you are not alone. God is there with you and he will help you through this. We are all part of the family of God and we can help each other. So, this week, look out for others who may be having a difficult time and reach out to them. A kind word, an offer to help with shopping, or collecting medicine, or offering to pray for them might be how the Holy Spirit prompts you to love your neighbour.

Remember, God loves you! Amen.

God bless you. *Frank*