

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter 2018

The youth rally on Friday night was enjoyed by all. Fr Rob Galea gave a great message to the young people and we all ate very well thanks to St John's hospitality students. We do have an insatiable need to get together in all kinds of ways. The daily use of social media is extraordinary. Facebook alone has well over 1 billion logins each day! Whatever the use we make of social media for good or bad it is pretty obvious that our ability to connect is a key human value and need.

Created in the image and likeness of God we are created in the image and likeness the Trinity. We are not created in the image and likeness of a distant god who pulls the levers of the universe. Our God is a communion. We are diminished when we lose our connections with family and friends and the wider web of social interaction, however tenuous. One of Jesus' most famous and loved parables is that of the vine and the branches we hear today. Hear what he says. His father is the vine dresser. He is the vine. We are the branches. Only if the branches remain on the vine will they bear fruit. We need the life giving sap of the vine to grow. We call that life the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. This is all metaphorical language of course. But for Jesus, life itself and who we are, is nothing without that connection. And we are all branches on the same vine. We cannot exist by ourselves. Cut off from him we can do nothing. He is not talking about sin as such here. It is just that a branch that is cut off just withers and dies. It is useless.

If we believe we are created by God in God's image as a communion of persons, the Trinity, then who we are makes no sense without God. We live in a society which values independence and personal growth. The successful, self-made person, is praised. That is fair enough. But if that is all we are, then, when it is taken from us by sickness or death, what are we then? We are much more than what we do. What that "much more" is we can only begin to fathom in prayer. This notion is madness if you do not believe in God to begin with.

Even the way we prepare the children for the Sacraments reflects this attitude to life. We had a parent session on Thursday evening for those whose children we are enrolling today. Such a meeting is more than an opportunity to impart information. So too are the group meetings they will take part in. Those gatherings are an expression of our response of Christ to us to remain part of the vine. They are the Church gathered already. So Jesus says remain in communion with one another. We have little hope of preparing children for the Sacraments if we are not first of all deeply aware of our unity in Christ by Baptism reaffirmed in our participation in the Eucharist. This is to remind us as well that in the daily give and take of family and community life we are living the life of the communion that is God already.

The pruning that Jesus speaks of, what is that? It is partly for us the awareness that slowly emerges in us if we follow Him. The awareness of the peeling away of all our illusions and pretences that we can create ourselves by our own efforts. That illusion is evident in all those people who feel they can never live up to what society expects. All they see is their failure. It is putting aside all attempts to be what we think others want us to be and let God be in us. To remain in the vine is our true home. As much as we dislike giving up control it is, paradoxically, only in doing so that we become truly free. Because to be what God wants us to be is who we really are. I suppose this requires a bit of a mystical imagination to see this way of living in the world. But I believe there is no one who has not caught a glimpse of the wonderful mystery of the world, one's neighbour, of oneself. Whatever it is we are doing each day, each day is lived in communion with God.

It is the humility of the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who thirst for justice. It is where God reigns. They are all invitations to enter more deeply in to life, not to escape from it. We do this not by grasping more and more things and ideas to possess. But simply recognising and coming to believe in the obvious fact of our own unasked for, undeserved, and astonishing gift of life that we so often take for granted.

Let us pray for the children beginning their preparation for their First Eucharist that they will come to know Jesus Christ better. And in coming to know him discover gift of the the love which the Father has implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Fr Graham Gatehouse