

Sixth Sunday of Easter Year A

Collect: God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son: grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 17.22–31 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

Gospel: John 14.15–21 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Reflection:

Over the last weeks there have been many things that it has not been possible for us to do; for some going out at all, for many not having direct interface with loved ones and for some having to cope with illness, medical treatment, end of life care and bereavement without the support of those closest to them. And at the same time whether working on the front line or in other jobs, people have had to take on new challenges and learn new ways of doing familiar things.

While some physical activity has been possible for many, the strain on mental well-being is a big one and many have experienced an increase in fear and anxiety. The need to talk with others is so important and telephone contacts can make a big difference. Today's service has been recorded outside. It has been until this week a particularly mild spring and there has been plenty of sunshine. For those able to go out this has helped us in facing the consequences of the virus and the restrictions placed on us. On the whole we do regard nature in a benign way and the pattern of light and dark, sunrise and twilight and of the four seasons, gives us reassurance. Last autumn and winter many parts of our country were badly affected by flood and with this a reminder of the power and devastation that floods can bring. It also asked of us to address more urgently the climate crisis we face. It is very apparent that the change to patterns of living that we currently experience is improving air quality and perhaps also enabling parts of the living world to better flourish.

It is this living world that I wanted to focus on today. I think the lockdown may be helping us recognise more clearly our relationship with it, our interconnectedness. Religious traditions and other philosophies have this as central to their teaching but most including Christianity have practices that have shown conflicting considerations based on mistrust of the natural world and justifying control of it for selfish reasons.

The speech of St Paul given to those gathered in the Areopagus in Athens, is a direct challenge to this. Within his speech we find affirmation from within the faith tradition he inherited and within Greek philosophy of Natural Law and he urges people to believe this as authentically good for all. Not to base laws on protecting the wealthy, or maintaining privilege, not to produce barriers of any kind, not to divide people through fears or prejudice. Paul instead urging all to embrace a universal natural law that went beyond the confines he recognised was the experience of many within Greek and Roman culture.

He points his audience towards a deeper searching and questioning urging them to notice human connectedness with the natural world and of the need for people to be less selfish, less proud and less inclined to dominate other people and the living world. His inspiration comes from the old testament story of the flood and the interpretation of the rainbow as a sign of God's benevolence, of the tradition written down in the form we have it from the sixth century BC of the opening chapters of Genesis recognising the pattern and order in the natural world as being God given.

Paul also identifies the benevolence of God and the pattern and order of things as found within his new faith. The inner dwelling of God's love that Jesus had experienced and communicated by his actions and by his teaching. The sharing within this love by the followers of Jesus who had come to believe that he had overcome the barrier of death and that his way lived on in the life they shared. Central to this they recognised the wisdom of God and at the heart of this an authentic goodness which the living world communicated and in which he urged people to recognise that they lived and moved and had their being.