

Pentecost Sunday in Southwell Minster

31 May 2020

Acts 2:1-21 and John 7:37-39

I wonder, what have you missed the most over the past ten weeks?

Perhaps it's seeing loved ones: grandchildren or an elderly parent isolating a long-distance away.

Maybe it's time with friends at church or meeting up in a coffee shop.

For those living alone, missing the personal contact and power of human touch.

For those living in a confined space with others, or home-schooling, it may be missing time on your own.

For those working on the frontlines against the coronavirus, missing going into work without the worry of being infected or returning home and infecting others.

Missing a long-anticipated holiday or a landmark occasion, a special birthday or dreamed for wedding.

Most painfully missing being at the bedside of someone dear in their final days or attending the funeral of a friend.

If some days we wonder why we feel tense and restless, even when we are thankful for some of the good things to come out of these past weeks, it really should be no surprise. The experience of absence and loss is disorientating and even soul-searching.

The worse thing we can do is try to cover it up the moment it surfaces; just start another Netflix series or tidy through another room, set up another zoom.

May be like me you have found through the intensity of these past weeks there are memories and feelings of absence and loss from the past which have also resurfaced, breaking through the layers of hard ground that time had laid down. And it's not so much the pain of that absence or loss but also the power of longing it uncovers, may be attached to a place or a person or a moment when we recall a sense of our soul being alive and our heart feeling at home.

This restless longing is what Jesus is addressing in John 7, describing it terms of an unquenchable thirst.

Jesus said, *“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”*

At the heart of this thirst is the struggle with absence and loss – stretching all the way back to the Garden of Eden – that is, to God’s purpose in creation.

In Jesus’s day the feast that brought God’s people to Jerusalem was meant to reconnect them with a time when they were in the wilderness learning to rely on God for all that they needed – looking to God alone to satisfy them with daily bread, purpose for life and rest for their souls. It was a struggle all the way through, but God didn’t give up on them because he was laying a foundation and from this people he would bring a Saviour for the world.

In New Testament times the festivals of pilgrimage had become a commercial enterprise as well as a cauldron for stirring up dissension. Jesus cuts through the narrow self-interest of people of power dictating the terms of the feast.

And he speaks into the deeper longings that have been suppressed and frustrated by the weary restrictions of life under Roman occupation.

Travelling into Jerusalem was a type of home-coming for many, a brief respite from the harsh realities of life. Jesus offers to satisfy an unquenchable longing by inviting people to come home to God by coming to him. The cross will soon break open the door to hearts that are double-bolted with shame and pride.

Our great temptation is to search everywhere else to meet our restless longing, not just in terms of material possessions and human achievements, but also to fall for a kind of inhuman love. Where we love finite people or things purely for how they will serve my sense of myself, my security and self-identity.

When people come to Jesus the relentless pull to self-fulfilment is abandoned in a moment of surrender. Our strongest desires are still with us but they are now being transformed, becoming re-ordinated around God.

Here's where I learn: that I'm most alive when God is at the centre of my solar system, not me.

Whatever we've learned under lockdown let it be this: that self-satisfaction however virtuous the means is never going to survive the storms of loss

and absence that will continue to mark our lives and wreak havoc on our world.

Every home-coming, every recovery from loss, every absence filled with new friends, can only ever be partial and temporary. God knows us – isn't that a terrifying and beautiful thing – and this knowledge is not something we can grasp like a piece of information, but in the form of trust in his eternal love – grounded for us in the person of Christ.

If you wondering what this sermon has got to do with Pentecost, it is this: that the absence of Jesus on earth did not create a tragic interlude until he comes again in glory, because the very presence of God, the strong love of Christ, is given to us through God the Holy Spirit. Until Jesus comes again, it's like a river of clear water flowing in a scorching desert.

And the source of that river starts from within.

“As Scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’. He said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were later to receive.”

The Christian apologist, Ravi Zacharias, who died ten days ago, said recently that as a world, “We are living in a confluence of great uncertainty with intense hunger.”

Through the past ten weeks the church, as the people of God, have not been locked-up, but very much alive, as rivers of living water have been flowing into homes, hospital wards and acts of kindness in every community across the nation. Of course Christians have no monopoly on such kindness, but we do have something unique to offer that can help to sustain it, something we have found, or rather has found us.

We have the only thing that can quench the soul’s thirst and lead a person home - it is the truth about the person of Jesus, the revelation of God in the face of Christ, and the promise of the Holy Spirit.

These past weeks nearly everyone has been given a fresh taste of the rare and precious commodity of human kindness and good neighbourliness. And we dare to hope this will not be lost when Covid-angst threatens to rise into a tsunami of blame and shame.

There will be lessons that must be learned for governments, for the Church and for society and we must not avoid them. But there is hope for our world because God is hope and he is calling people home to him. If you want to know more and how that can happen for you then send an email to me or Dean Nicola and we would be pleased to support you and pray for you.

It will be some time before we can gather again as we did before in our precious places of prayer, but in the meantime rivers of living water will continue to flow wherever we are and whatever we are given to do, whatever we face in our lives and our world, as the Holy Spirit re-orientates our longings towards God of love, in whom we can be deeply satisfied with inexpressible joy now and for all eternity. Amen.