

**Sunday 5 May 2024**  
**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**NT: Acts 10:44-48**

**NT: I John 5:1-6**

**Gp: John 15:9-17**

One of the symptoms of getting older is that my pop culture references are anything but that. I have to remind myself of this when talking to students. I tend to think that any event after the year 2000 is recent. But the reality is that, for nearly all the students I teach, the year 2000 happened three to five years before they were born. It is to them what the early 60s and the assassination of Kennedy are to me. My brain knows this, but my subconscious has yet to catch up.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound: I'm going to make an even more out of date pop culture reference. Let me take you back to the mid 90s and to the classic sitcom that was Father Ted. Father Ted followed the chaotic adventures of three hopelessly inadequate Catholic priests on the fictional Craggy Island off the west coast of Ireland. I thought of Father Ted when I was wondering what to say today. Here I am preaching at my own licensing service. Of course, one could argue that my licensing is only a small part of the service, but let's not underestimate my ego.

In any case, my mind went to the episode where Ted himself finally gets the recognition he assumes he deserves. After averting an embarrassing situation, when he and several other priests got lost in the lingerie section of a big department store, Ted was honoured with the Priest of the Year award. At the ceremony, he gave a long speech. Most of it was settling scores with all the people who had crossed him over the years, those - and there were many - who had failed to see what a brilliant priest he was. Then came the time in the speech to thank people. But, as Ted reflected, he'd won the award through his own efforts, so the only person to thank was – himself!

I wondered if that would be a good model for my address. It might even be one of my more memorable sermons.

It is tempting for priests, for anyone who has a public role, to enjoy the limelight a little too much. A priest climbing into the pulpit can feel like they are rising from obscurity. They have, if not a captive audience, at least a congregation who are willing to sit through what they have to say to get to what's on the other side.

I don't mean to suggest that priests are uniquely bad in this respect. People who like the sound of their own voice, people who like an audience, are common enough in many areas of life. But the priest is supposed to represent something else, perhaps something about

service and humility. The problem is that this whole idea of what and whom the priest stands for is fraught. In the eucharist especially the priest represents both the people to God and Christ to the congregation. It is potentially intoxicating stuff.

In reality, priests are more likely to suffer from a sense of inadequacy and imposter syndrome as much as an inflated ego. The impossible ideals of the calling, and the fragility of one's own soul, create these tensions. It is important to stay grounded. But where do we look for help in doing that?

There are many answers: family and friends, who will not let you get away with either self-importance or self-flagellation; a wise congregation and colleagues, who understand that priestly ministry is always something shared; interests outside of the church always help. To these, I would like to add the reading of scripture. Now I know that sounds very pious and exactly what you would expect a priest to say. And often in sermons we are told that the Bible is there to answer our problems or show us in detail what God's plan is for our life. Well, I don't buy much of that. Answers and plans are usually what we dream up to give us a sense of control.

No, the Bible is important to me when it *challenges* certainties. When it disarms us, when it opens up our closed world of answers. Take our first reading from Acts. Peter has been invited to speak by the centurion Cornelius. Part of him is wary: he should not be associating with unclean Gentiles. But he goes – and as he talks about Jesus, the Holy Spirit falls on his hearers. It is like a second Pentecost, but this time, the ones speaking in tongues are pagans. And then Peter says the wonderful line: 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

I don't believe in proof texts, but if I did what a wonderful one that would be for an inclusive church, for same sex marriage, for everything that pushes us out of our borders of race, nation, class: 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

As the Catholic theologian James Alison says, here Peter is catching up with what God is already doing. He is swimming in the wake of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth that goes where it will, like the wind – crossing boundaries without a care. Of course, the story is told with the benefit of hindsight, from a time when Gentiles had been accepted. But one of the glories of the New Testament is that it does not sugarcoat how difficult this whole transition was. This passage in Acts 10 is only part of a long process of conflict and difficult meetings and fallings out and splits. Just read Paul's letters for what he says about Peter and about some of his other opponents who doubted that Gentiles could be admitted to the church. Paul is not one to mince his words. Dress it up however you want: this was bare knuckle stuff.

But the heart of it, again and again, is this: we are catching up with what God is *already doing*. We are caught up in the slipstream of God's grace as it is poured out without any reference to what we consider proper or planned. Because what is God's 'plan' for us? Not a road map of everything that should happen in our life or a set of rigid rules to live by. It will not save us from struggle, loss or uncertainty. It is far more promise than plan. And what does it promise?

According to our gospel, it promises friendship with God. In the end, God does not want lackeys, but friends: those who love as God loves. That does not make things easy. It won't answer every question or shield us from suffering. But it is a path of joy. The joy of knowing that God is for us, that the heart of reality itself is love.

It is so simple. And so difficult. Because if God is for us then God is for everyone. And how much we'd like that not to be the case. We'd like to be part of the in group but that would mean there has to be an out group. Sometimes, we'd even like to exclude ourselves because we think we're not worthy. Well, tough: God has always gone ahead of us and outside our walls. And if we resist and complain, she simply looks back to us and says: catch up.

So should I end this sermon by thanking myself? Tempting, but: no. A licensing is, in any case, not like getting an award. It is a granting of permission, an authorisation to a particular place and role. In priestly ministry, that can only mean taking part in what God is *already doing* in this time and this place. At this moment, as we face an open future, we can have confidence that God waits for us there. I look forward to walking that path with you.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**