

Homily for 6th Sunday of Eastertide (year A) 17th May 2020

In the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, we now get it clearly stated: the connection between the sacramental action of the laying on of hands, and receiving the Holy Spirit. *“Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 8:17) This act of touching follows the pattern set by Jesus in His ministry of healing. The healing accounts in the Gospels so often contain very specific, sometimes almost graphic, physical detail, that there can be no doubt that this is the genuine, real, historical Jesus shining through. For instance: *“He...put his fingers into the man’s ears and touched his tongue with spittle.”* (Mark 7:33). And with children we see it too, *“Then he put his arms round them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing.”* (Mark 10:16). It seems clear then that Jesus too would have found Social Distancing a problem.

Touch, and its absence, is one of the deep pains of the lock-down, and not just for those who live alone. The dying and the bereaved, grandparents and grandchildren, and countless others are separated. No amount of zooming, face-timing, telephoning, or socially distanced meeting replaces a hug or some hand holding. We should also bear in our prayers those who are currently trapped in a household with someone who they absolutely do not want to touch them, and can’t get away. Touch is powerful: too much or too little of it, or the wrong sort, messes with our spirits and can lead us astray. The need for it can emerge in inappropriate ways. Beware the Tempter exploiting the vulnerability of this time.

In the Sacraments of the Church we are touched by God. By becoming human in Jesus, and in sending the Holy Spirit, God enters the World. The Sacraments continue that movement. Divine Grace comes to us through physical forms: water, oil, bread, wine, laying on of hands, spousal bodies. Our merciful God comes to us in ways that we can sense and experience in the physical world, as well as coming to us in the spiritual world. But this brilliant plan runs into problems when we can’t touch or get close to another, meaning that much of it we can’t do at the moment. And so we find ourselves in this time of sacramental fasting, hungry and thirsty for the touch of Our Lord.

His words in today’s Gospel take on a new, painful, raw relevance for us. *“I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.”* (John 14:18). That is our first beacon of hope today – the day of return will come. The second beacon of hope is keeping His commandments. *“Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me...*

...and I shall love him and show myself to him.” (v.21). Keep calm and carry on. Keep on keeping on, and He will reveal His presence to you.

The third beacon of hope is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises to ask the Father to send us the ‘Advocate’, the Spirit of Truth. Alternative translations of the Greek *Parakletos* are: Paraclete, Advocate, Intercessor, Counsellor, Protector, Support, Comforter. Choose whichever speaks best to you at this time, but don’t miss the end of verse 17: *“he is with you, he is in you.”*

As we approach the great Solemnities of Ascension and Pentecost, let us renew our prayer asking the Holy Spirit to reveal this real presence within us. Let us re-consecrate our homes and our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. Remember the antiphon that is sung on Maundy Thursday at the offertory: *“Ubi caritas est vera, Deus ibi est.”* Where true charity is dwelling, God is present there.