

**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, after Ascension (Yr A). Past memories; future hopes.**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Acts 1:12-14: Disciples & Jesus' relatives in the Upper Room.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 1 Peter 4:13-16: Future hope amid present difficulties;**

**Gospel: John 17:1-11a: Jesus' prayer for the future Church.**

As we grow older, we sometimes think about the places that mattered to us in the past. It could be our old family living room or lounge; the bedroom in which we grew up; parts of the school we attended; a holiday destination; a favourite place when courting; the spot where the marriage question was 'popped'; and so on. As a priest, I think of the old, now-demolished Church of St Aidan at Willington Quay (between Wallsend & North Shields), where I served Mass, and was ordained in 1971. That area is now unrecognizable; then, it was an place of old houses and industry, the streets still gas-lit! Another room some of you may remember was the upstairs chapel in St Cuthbert's Grammar (later High) School in Newcastle. In my school days, it had a certain smell (from the polish) and old-style lights. But enough of my boring memories!

I've described all this because the room mentioned in this weekend's first reading had a similar place in the life of the infant Church. It was the Upper Room in Jerusalem. A nice (if unreliable) tradition said that it belonged to St Mark's mother, and that he was a teenage follower of Jesus. (Perhaps he was the unlucky youth mentioned in Mark 14:51-52!) Six and a half weeks before this weekend, that room had witnessed the Last Supper - the washing of the feet, the sacred meal itself, and Judas' departure to betray Jesus. Later that night, most disciples returned there, like scared rabbits, after Jesus' arrest. Three days later, the 'dead' Jesus appeared to them and gave them proof of the resurrection, and the command to go out to evangelise. A week after that, Thomas had his 'doubts' settled, when Jesus offered him physical proof. They had not 'camped out' in the room: St John (chapter 21) has them returning to Galilee for a time (just to go fishing and earn money, if for no other reason). However, it was their base in Jerusalem; their place of safety; their comfort zone.

This weekend in the Church Year, we think of what those people in that room already had, and what they still needed. I suggest they had experience, but needed inspiration. They had witnessed incredible things with Jesus, in his public life and after his death. He had offered them power and authority. What they lacked at this moment was inspiration and a sense of leadership – the motivation and power to share their experiences with the people outside. (That

would come the next weekend, at Pentecost.) We usually pray for inspiration and leadership at this time; but this year, I feel, we need them even more.

At the moment, as a diocese, we are, in one way, like the people in that upper room: a bit nervous, and uncertain as to what exactly will happen next. Obviously, we, as part of the international Catholic Church, have ‘experience’: 2000 years of church history! In this region, the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle is long-established; our parishes have their traditions, with lots of practice in involving families in the faith, and so on. This is not disputed, because it’s part of our history. But, like those in the upper room, there is still uncertainty – all of us involved in the diocese await a new bishop’s arrival.

I think there is another reason why we need to pray for the Holy Spirit’s help. Since the lock-down began three over 3 years ago, many have obtained their religious experience on-line – through websites like ours, live-streaming of services, and the social media. There’s no going back on this, and we and other parishes must continue it, and take it forward. However, it is not a substitution, either in church law, or in community life, for sharing properly at Mass in our parish churches. But, we have to face it: how many have lost the habit of church-going, and do not want to return? How do we persuade them to change?

In the gospel, Jesus prays for his followers in the future – that’s us, now. He says to his Father: “I am not praying for the World, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you....and in them I am glorified.” It is often hard to realize that you who are reading these notes (and I) “belong to the Father” and that we are the means of Jesus’ glorification. We are in no way perfect (at least, I’m not!), yet it is through us that Jesus’ name is spread, his work gets done, and thus God’s Kingdom is built up. We all have a part to play.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance for our new bishop (when he comes) and his senior team. Since big decisions will have to be made, they’ll need inspiration from on high! This is our 2023 equivalent of the mood of those in that Upper Room 2000 years ago. On the other hand, the Pandemic and recent events here have taught me to value, even more than I did in the past, the contributions of so many to the work of all our parishes. I think that has been possible by the Holy Spirit’s help. “Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth...” *Fr Jim Dunne.*