

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 2020.

St Paul declares that our interests are in the spiritual since the Spirit of God has made His home in us. If it isn't in the spiritual, if it isn't in recognition that the whole of life is bound together in and with God and in the realisation that we live in union with God every moment of every day, then we would need to look somewhere else for our acute feelings of separation and dislocation that we have felt over the past fifteen weeks that we have had to live apart from His unique presence in the Sacrament, and alongside other members of His body, the community of the faithful.

But now we have returned. Gradually we are once again able to be the visible body of Christ in one place, in one sacred space, taking to ourselves the riches of his unique presence in word, company and sacrament. We can take the words of Zechariah from the Old Testament reading and shout "Rejoice, heart and soul, daughter of Zion, Shout with gladness daughter of Jerusalem; See now your King comes to you; he is victorious, he is triumphant."

It is on this note of rejoicing that I would like to begin our gradual return from what feels like an Exile, and take up the words of Jesus from the Gospel, "I bless you Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth." Most translations use the words "Thanks" rather than "Bless", "I thank you Father", for the Greek word, "*exomologeo*" is nearer to the word Thanks than Blessing. We come together with a profound feeling of gratitude and thanks, and to get the full import of this word Thanks, as it appears in holy writings, we need to look at a collection of writings where this word thanks, *exomologeo* appears most frequently, and for that I want to take you to the arid, blistering heat of the Judean desert and a place called Qumran.

It was here in 1947 that a Bedouin boy while tending his sheep threw a stone into a cave near the shore of the Dead Sea, and heard it hit something. On inspection he discovered several large jars containing ancient scrolls and parchments, what we now know to be the Dead Sea Scrolls. One set of these scrolls were discovered to be, what are now called The Thanksgiving Hymns. In many ways, as you would expect, they are similar in composition and style to the Psalms that we are most familiar with. However these Hymns are centred on the theme of thankfulness, that we are frail creatures made of clay and yet

God not only draws us deeper into the mysteries of his love He saves us from opposition, persecution, and, personal tribulation.

The author expresses his gratitude that he has been delivered from a dangerous situation and that in his lowliness he has been given the ability to understand the divine mysteries, very much like the mere children that Jesus talks about in the Gospel. For a good many of us i think we can understand what the scroll writer was trying to articulate. We have faced a dangerous situation, and it is not over yet, but we now have the opportunity to thank God for our preservation and for all those who have come through, and to thank Him that we have the opportunity to do so within the framework of that one Sacrament that goes by the name of Thanksgiving and that is the Eucharist.

It is always much easier to say thanks when life is offering good things and gifts and a level road, but it is much harder during uncertainty and amidst the unknown. And this is something we also have to address. Some of us might not feel like saying thank you. There have been times over the past fifteen weeks when, i am sure, there has been struggle. A few of us as you well know were able to continue to say mass, but there were times when the last thing on my lips was a thank you, particularly when faced with an empty church, an intimidating camera that loves to pick up every mistake, and then the news that one of my dear friends and colleague that i trained as a chaplain died within hours of contracting the virus leaving a young family. Often the thought arose “what use is thanksgiving now; unless it was just an exercise in self deception?

But then we need to dig a bit deeper. Both the writer of the Thanksgiving scroll and the words of Jesus to His disciples link the giving of thanks with divine mysteries. This is all important; for now we are not giving thanks as means of avoiding reality, it is not a substitute for reality, it is to give voice and recognition to another kind of reality which lies beyond the immediate, beyond the questions and the unfathomable and beyond the need to instantly understand everything in the presence.

A nun once remarked that when she was a young novice one of the older nuns in the convent said that when people went to heaven they would sit around the throne of God for all eternity singing Alleluia, which is just another way of

giving thanks for all things. She remembers groaning audibly and thinking as much as she longed for heaven, somehow it had now lost a lot of its immediacy. It was only as she matured in herself and in the faith and realised the importance of being able to constantly say thank you to God day and night through good times and bad because it was in that particular relationship between her and God that the real meaning of hope and life presented itself.

And when you think carefully about it, our liturgy and especially those rites that mark key moments in our lives, birth, growing up, illness and death are all shot through with moments of thanksgiving. It is in these moments that we are invited to trust, to look beyond our world into the kingdom of God and discern his loving guidance in all things as he leads us through the journey of life with its struggles and joys in equal measure. Thank you God for bringing us back home to spiritual home, back to your presence in the sacrament, and thank you God for these your people who have been so sorely missed.

AMEN