

SUNDAY 21 MAY 2023 - SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (Sunday after the Ascension)

Acts 1. 6-14

(1 Peter 4. 12-14; 5. 6-11)

John 17. 1-11

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world”. This is what Jesus says to God in the Gospel we have just heard, although clearly he is not aware of GDPR.

There must be few people who don't want to be known by anyone. Most of us like to be known, don't we ? Of course there are different ways of this happening: we can be known by passers-by on the street, known by sight, but we are also known by our parents, close relations, acquaintances and friends in varying degrees. Like on Facebook we can control this, so that not everything about us is known – at least not to everyone. It's a very human characteristic, and we human beings can be very cunning about what we reveal to each other or conceal from each other.

But leaving GDPR to one side there is one relationship which could not be more different: our relationship with God. In the Gospel passage today, Jesus is praying to God his father about his disciples, because he knows what is about to happen to him. He is shortly going to be betrayed, crucified and then raised from the dead, before finally disappearing from their view for ever (which we celebrated last Thursday in the Feast of the Ascension).

Jesus is speaking to God in the presence of his disciples, so that they can hear the degree of intimacy between them. Not only that – they can hear that Jesus is praying to God about them. As with the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus first taught his disciples to pray to God, he is showing them how

much he trusts them by confirming their faith: “they have received and kept your word....they know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me”. There is an urgency in his words because Jesus knows there is not much time left – he will soon be gone, but the disciples will remain in the world, with a huge task ahead of them.

This is the sort of relationship with God that Jesus is teaching his disciples to practise. It is therefore also the sort of relationship we are called upon to practise, because it has been faithfully handed on to us by generations of disciples. It is a relationship in which there are and can be no secrets. In Psalm 139 we have a foretaste of it: “Search me and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts; you discern my thoughts from far away”.

That sounds rather unnerving, but there is no threat in this. God in his infinite wisdom has endowed us human beings with free will, so we are free to reject him if we think that suits us. We are also free to welcome and embrace him, to follow his son Jesus Christ’s example and treat him as the most intimate friend we have, to whom we can say everything and reveal every aspect of ourselves. In fact there is no point in concealment, because God knows us all inside out from the moment we are conceived in our mother’s womb.

In the narrative at the beginning of Acts, which was our first reading today, the disciples gather together to question Jesus for the last time: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel ?” Jesus replies to say in effect ‘mind your own business’, but goes on to say that they will receive power from on high when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. In other words he is re-directing their attention from the national expectation to a much more immediate future. The imminent coming of the Spirit will mean their own empowerment for the task of acting as witnesses to Jesus, not only in Judea and Samaria but also in the wider world. We will celebrate this coming once more at Pentecost next Sunday.

This is the wonderful prospect prepared not only for us, day in, day out, but especially for those whose parents have taken the decision to bring them for baptism, and also importantly for adults who have recognised God's call to take the first step on their Christian journey into the intimacy of a relationship with God. It is a relationship in which new Christians are chosen, they will be protected and they will be sanctified as members of that family which is the body of Jesus Christ, both here in this place and all over the world. In due course it will fall to them, as it has to us, to say to God and to Jesus: "I have made your name known, as I myself am known by you".

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