

KEEPING HOPE ALIVE

Nicky Ing - 1st May 2005

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-19; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

The setting of the Gospel passage we have just read is during the last supper...the night before Jesus' crucifixion. He had been giving his friends hints about the fact that he would soon die.....and now he talks to them openly about it. In these last hours with his disciples, Jesus speaks about essential things that he wants them to understand. The parting of good friends is never easy...Jesus speaks of his death as a going away, 'going to the Father'....but they do not understand what that means.

There are different kinds of 'leaving'....there is the leaving that abandons someone...like sometimes we read in the newspapers, a baby abandoned on a street by a desperate mother who feels unable to cope. To be **abandoned** is a painful and damaging thing to happen to anyone, especially a helpless child or a frail elderly person. There are other kinds of 'leaving' too; the **rejection** of a broken engagement, or where a marriage partner makes a decision to end a marriage; or when a business partnership is ended in an unsatisfactory way, one of the parties feels let down; it can also be painful and indeed life-changing. There is also the kind of leaving in which a person goes to take up a new appointment somewhere else, and this can also be for the good of those who are left behind...this is what is happening here in our Gospel reading. Jesus' leaving the disciples and returning to the Father will be for their good, because he will send them the Holy Spirit. Although they fear that he is going to abandon them, he promises that he will not leave them like orphans; that they will be supported and guided. Even as he speaks about leaving them, he speaks about coming back to them, through the gift of the Spirit. Much of what Jesus says here is directed towards the future, and how he wants them to live their lives. One of the things he says is 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' Clearly Jesus is talking here about guidelines for his followers...guidelines for new attitudes towards God, and neighbour, and towards life itself. These are to be found in Jesus' teachings in the Gospels...there are positive ones, and negative ones too. The 'don't's' include returning evil for evil...in other words, retaliation. We may not judge one another (tempting though that is!) neither can we condemn. We need not worry about food, drink, and clothes, because the way we live as children of God is most important, and everything else will find its own place. Storing up material things will not bring us eternal happiness. Keep on persevering, and **trusting** in God...and keep **hope** alive, even in times of difficulty. On the positive side, Jesus taught that we need to let our light shine....remembering that it comes from God and not ourselves! Love our enemies...those whom we don't like much, or who have even been unkind to us, and forgive them unconditionally...give generously....the measure we give will be the measure we receive from God. We are told to keep our minds and hearts clean...our thoughts, words and deedsand love one another, just as Jesus has loved us, so that people will know that we are his disciples!

There is just one thing we need to be sure about. We don't keep Jesus' commandments so that he will love us....we keep his commandments *because he loves us.*

Now I doubt if there can be anyone here who thinks it is easy to live as a disciple of Jesus in our world. It never was an easy thing! But that is why we are offered the gift of the Holy Spirit....to help us in our weakness; to comfort us in our sadness, to bring us light and **hope** in times of darkness. And that gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for us to keep for ourselves! Jesus expects that we use this gift to offer help to others who are weak, to comfort those who are sad, to bring light and hope to people in dark places of despair. That second reading we listened to this morning, from the first letter of Peter, tells the early Christian community that they should always have an answer for people who ask the reason for the **hope** that they have. This letter was written at a time when there was much persecution in the early Church, and many were being killed for their faith. It is not easy to keep hope alive in such circumstances. But Jesus has promised his followers the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, with them and within them. The early disciples knew that Jesus loved them, and **we** know that Jesus loves us too. That Spirit which sustained the early Christian believers through persecution and martyrdom is the same Spirit given to all who love and follow Jesus. That gift and promise is extended to each one of us in our own struggle in faith.

May we know that wonderful sense of belonging, and experience the ongoing power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The challenges for us are many, if we choose to recognize and respond to them.

Visiting the Howick Clinic this week to help a friend take her **very** ill domestic worker who needed to be admitted to hospital, was quite difficult and sad for me; I also found it an emotionally draining experience, as I have known the sick person for several years. But it was so wonderful to see the compassion and gentleness of the medical staff at the clinic, and a such a privilege to pray with her and ask Jesus to be her strength and comfort and bring her peace in this time of serious illness. We are **all** so very vulnerable in our humanity, but sometimes it takes a huge crisis for us to recognize our **own** frailty, our own need, and put all our trust in God. And of course, the spirit of Jesus **is** present with us, **always**, as he promised, not just as a vague memory of a person who lived long ago, but as a real and life-giving presence that can transform us. As we celebrate the Eucharist together this morning, we can ask that we may be nourished by his wonderful love for us. We long to receive afresh the strength and the **hope** that each one of us needs to follow in Jesus' way of love and to live as his disciples, bringing that hope to others.

I found a beautiful prayer this week, in a new book which has just been published, by Rev. David Walker. The book is called 'Terror by Night, Hope shining in Dark places'...and it is the story of David's own spiritual journey and his personal struggles with clinical depression. I believe this book can be a great help to other people who suffer in this way. There is a copy in the parish library as well. I would like to end by reading this prayer from the book.

God of life and source of all good,
We give thanks for the assurance that those
Who wait upon you will be renewed in strength.
In the midst of weariness and discouragement,
When sometimes we feel
That our striving to serve you and our fellows is futile,
Grant that we may catch a fresh vision of your
Inexhaustible resources
And cosmic purpose.
Then, in your grace, may we prove what it is to
Wait upon you and have our strength renewed.

Amen