St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 3rd May 2026 i.e. 5th Sunday of Easter

Genesis 8:1-19
Acts 7:55-end
John 14:1-14

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few weeks ago I wrote a letter to all of you. I hope you've seen it; there are still a few paper copies around if you'd like one. In that letter I was giving thanks for your generosity, the generosity I already see you practising. But I was also encouraging you to look again at how you give to the church here, and to give more if you think can. The fruitful ministry of this church community depends on gifts. So in that letter I quoted what Saint Paul says about those things: about fruitfulness, and gift, and generosity. He writes about them at the end of his letter to the Galatians [especially 5:22-23; 6:9-10].

I suspect the Christians in Galatia had mixed feelings about Paul's letter. I don't know how you received my letter: the Sunday it went out I did what clergy tend to do immediately after Easter, which is, I cleared off. Since then it's occurred to me that it would be good to do some follow up. What I realised is that it's all very well encouraging people to be generous, and to reflect on their giving; but the virtue of generosity doesn't just appear from nowhere, and it doesn't survive in a vacuum. I felt there was more I could say about giving; and I'd like to do that today.

Generosity is what Saint Paul calls a “fruit of the Spirit”. In other words it's a habit, a seed that takes root in us when we open our lives to God's life. If our lives are like soil, and we're intending to grow certain things in that soil, it makes sense to ask what sort of a soil is best, and how we can prepare it.

I think the picture of Christian life that Jesus sketches in our Gospel reading today goes a long way towards answering to that question. With good reason, we often read this passage at funerals. In conversation with his friends Jesus does what he can to reassure them that even though he is going away his friends don't need to be afraid.

Fear gets in the way of all sorts of character growth. It operates on our hearts and on our minds: in other words, fear stops us thinking clearly, and it also stops us desiring what it is in our best interests to desire. So the remedy for fear is to guard both our hearts and our minds, our desires and our thoughts.

And that's what Jesus tries to do for his friends. Firstly, he tries to guide them into good patterns of thinking. “Believe in God,” he says. “Believe also in me” [John 14:1]. And again he says, “You know the way to the place where I am going” [14:4]. That provokes a curious exchange; and we learn that it's relationship with Jesus that leads to that sort of knowledge, because he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” [14:6]. Woven through these snatches of conversation are the foundations for a change of mind. And so here we have the virtue of faith, which Scripture tells us is about believing things that we cannot know by the usual means [Heb. 11:1].

I should clarify that faith isn't about believing just anything. True faith protects us against fear, but it doesn't leave us vulnerable to manipulation and distraction on other fronts. Rather, being faithful means being able to think clearly about our priorities even when circumstances aren't great. I think the application of that to talk about generosity is clear. A faithful person isn't gullible, but neither are they cynical and self-serving: they are free of fear, free to practise other virtues like prudence and justice. The Church of England (and the Diocese of Salisbury, and the Benefice of Dorchester and the Winterbournes) could do with cultivating more of this sort of faith.

So to protect us against fear, Jesus offers us the gift of faith, to guard our minds. But it isn't just our thoughts that need protecting. Fear also affects our desires. You may have noticed that if you're really afraid you stop feeling hungry, for a while. If we are anxious we lose our appetite for the good things we would normally want. We put to one side subtle pleasures and deferred gratification, and we start casting around for the overwhelming sensation, the immediate hit. That's what fear does to our desires.

The solution to that comes on two fronts. The first part is the virtue of hope. Whereas faith is about believing things we cannot know by the usual means, hope is about desiring what we do not yet see [Romans 8:24-25]. And Jesus wants his friends to desire in this way.

> In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also. [John 14:2-3]

In these words, and in other parts of this conversation, Jesus invites us to put our anxiety to one side and to grow in hope, to desire what is good. Hope tells us that it is good for us to be with him where he is; it is good to see the Father. Again, it's so obvious why we read this at funerals: being in the

presence of God is the best thing we can hope for ourselves or for our loved ones, even if grief can sometimes make that difficult to see.

Jesus knows that it isn't possible to make people desire the good they cannot see. All he can really do is whet our appetite. I think that's part of the reason why it's good to make churchgoing a habit, and a dominant habit. When the normal pattern of our lives is shaken up by events, it's the habits we don't even have to think about that survive.

Again, I ought to clarify: hope isn't about desiring anything and everything. Our appetites need to be guided by what we know to be good. It should be clear where generosity fits in with this. Fear obscures our connections to other people, to our wider community. When we are told that the things we need are scarce, the temptation is to cut loose from other people, to keep the good things that we see to ourselves. Hope frees our hearts from fear: we remember that, at our best, we desire connection, purpose, meaning. Generosity becomes possible again.

Faith and hope on their own go a long way towards guarding us against fear. But there is something else we need. For virtues like generosity to germinate and take root and thrive in us, we also need love. In next week's Gospel Jesus that

> Those who love me will keep my word, my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them. [John 14:23]

Like hope, love also acts on our desires. But whereas hope is a negative thing – hope is the desire for what we do not yet see – love is positive, it is about “keeping” things, and making a home. When we do finally know everything we need to know, faith comes to an end. When we do finally see everything we could wish to see, hope comes to an end. I imagine we'll be hearing more about love next week, but now all I need to say is that love never ends [1 Corinthians 13:8].

It turns out the soil of our hearts is a microcosm, it is a habitat. And three virtues in particular make the soil of our hearts a good place to grow other virtues: they are faith, hope and love. As we seek to practise generosity here at St Mary's, I invite you to ask yourself again: what do I love, and to what extent? How do I allow my choices to be informed by hope? What do I believe about the future, and where do I place my faith?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.