

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 17th May 2026 i.e. 7th Sunday of Easter

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Acts 1:6-14

John 17:1-11

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

Earlier this year Lydia went back to the States to spend some time with her family. And she offered to bring some of her books back with her. So she collected a couple I'd never read; among them one called *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury.

For those who haven't read it, *Fahrenheit 451* is set in a future that is disturbing, and in some ways very familiar. The premise is that people have fallen out of love with reading. Books have become scandalous: people don't want to put in the effort to read them, and when they see a book, they feel like they are being judged. So, out of shame, perhaps out of pride, they burn them. It's only once people start doing that that the government jumps on the bandwagon: "firemen" are given a new task, to enforce the new laws against the possession of literature. That's where the name of the book comes from: four-five-one Fahrenheit is supposed to be the temperature at which paper catches fire by itself.

The main character of the book is one of those firemen. For someone in his line of work he has a bad habit: he compulsively picks up books and hides them, without knowing why. So one day at work he saves a Bible, and he reads it. That encounter, along with several others, changes his world forever.

Like the people in the book, we are becoming obsessed with our screens, and we're forgetting the subtle pleasure of quietly and gradually listening to another person's thoughts. It feels very relevant. But the main reason I mention *Fahrenheit 451* is because of the way it talks about desire. In the book it's the desire to read; but the desire I'm thinking of is the desire for God.

What does the desire for God look like?

Yesterday I was sitting in the library at Hilfield Friary thinking about what I was going to say this morning. I had an hour or so before the lunchtime Mass; so I found a comfortable armchair, and within a few minutes I had a Bible open on my lap. The Bible was open at Ezekiel chapter thirty-six, which we read a few minutes ago. The Lord says to Ezekiel

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. [Ezekiel 36:26-28]

So I'm sitting reading these words in the library at Hilfield. And I look up, I look around me; and it occurs to me that I'm surrounded by all sorts of books that Christians have written over the last two thousand years. The emotional effect of that is mixed. On one level, I find all these books impressive: I couldn't read them all if I spent the rest of my life doing nothing else. But the library also seems like a sad thing: so many faded bindings; such a lot of masking tape; such a lot of dust.

All of these books, to greater and lesser degrees, are the products of something really basic. Every one of these authors had a desire for something – call it a desire for truth, or for God, or for freedom in the Spirit. Some of these authors are dry sorts of people by most of our standards – I suspect it takes a dry sort of mind to write several volumes on any subject – but others of these authors are firebrands, and in their day even the act of writing their book was enough to scandalise the world they lived in. Such a lot of human variety; but all of them had a flame of desire burning in their hearts: for some it was only a pilot light, for others a bonfire of the Spirit.

I put it to you that the same is true for each and every one of us gathered here this morning, and in churches up and down the land. Some of us are cold and dry. We tie ourselves in knots with our anxieties and our habitual sins. Our desire for truth and for God and for freedom in the Spirit may be very faint at times. There may be a lot of dust in our life. Or to use Ezekiel's image: our heart may often seem like it's made out of stone.

God says, "I will remove from your body the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh."

That's a persistent theme in the life of the Spirit, the life of faith. In the book of Revelation the Spirit challenges the community of Christians in Ephesus by saying

...I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen... [Rev. 2:4-5]

That's all of us, to some extent. We all have the capacity to forget our first love. But by God's grace we also have the capacity to remember, to grow, to fan that flame. That transformation, and the transformation that Ezekiel is talking about, is the same thing going on in the main character in *Fahrenheit 451*. And it's also happening in all of us. The reason I come to church at all – the reason why all of you are here, to some degree or other – is that God is already at work in us prising apart the cracks in our hard hearts. The Spirit is coaxing us into warmth, into desire, into life.

The experience of having our hearts replaced – flesh for stone – is almost certainly going to be painful. We are learning to be sensitive in a new way; we have new nerves. And we can't live in the way we did before either. That's what Jesus' disciples discover through Holy Week, and in the days after he ascends into heaven. They are being transformed faster than the world around them; and conflict is

inevitable. Jesus tells his disciples in our Epistle reading today that they will be “witnesses”; the word for witness is “martyr”.

That’s why Jesus prays in the way that he does in our Gospel reading. He prays for protection, but for more than protection: also for glory, and for joy. This is what life in the Spirit looks like: pain, perhaps; but also glory and joy.

Let’s pray:

O God the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you, leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.