

During these Sundays of the Easter season we see a gradual shift in the emphasis in the Gospel readings appointed for use. In the Sundays immediately after Easter, we read of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, those experiences of the disciples in those days after the resurrection. Then as this season of Easter progresses we have read of the teaching of Jesus in the Upper Room on that night before he died in which he talks of his significance, he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, of the meaning of his coming death and then today we get a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We begin this season with a looking back to Easter and move towards a looking forward to the coming of the Spirit. I want to think a bit about looking back and looking forward. To begin, I want to look back to a broadcast by the late King George 6th on the first Christmas of the Second World War. He began with a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, a lecturer in the London School of Economics, for whom poetry was something of a side line.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied:
“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

It is a poem that speaks to us of a presence that goes with us into the unknown.

Of course the past is known but the future, and what lies ahead for us, is unknown.

This is the season of examinations. For some this will be just School exams (I say ‘just’ as one for whom exams are (thank goodness) a thing of the past.) For others there are the Junior and Leaving Cert and College exams. Of course they have prepared, they know what is coming – yet until that paper is in front of them, there is anxiety, there is uncertainty.

For others, the future is uncertain for different reasons. There may be anxiety about themselves or ones dear to them. And there is a loneliness to our uncertainty. Our young people are not taking their exams by themselves – there will be plenty of others in the exam hall, family and friends will have wished them well – but it is they who will turn over that exam paper, not their Mum and Dad. It is they who will have to write – not their teacher, their friend but them. It is the same with anxieties we may have – friends may offer support and understanding but it is we who have the uncertainty, the fears.

This is where our Gospel reading speaks to me this morning – whether we are worried about exams, whether we are worried about ourselves or our loved ones.

¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. *John 14:16ff*

The Advocate, the one who walks the road with us, stands alongside us. The Holy Spirit who is with us, within us in whatever situation we find ourselves, whatever anxiety we may have, whatever challenge we may have to face.

So whatever lies ahead, may you know that you do not face it alone. God is with you, even in his apparent absence. God is with you even when he seems far away. He knows our deepest thoughts, our hopes, our fears, our hurts, our pain, our dreams.

And so we pray:

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:
let him lead you each day into the quiet place
of your heart, where he will speak with you;
know that he watches over you –
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,
that he is with you always,
wherever you are and however you may feel:
and the blessing of God Almighty,