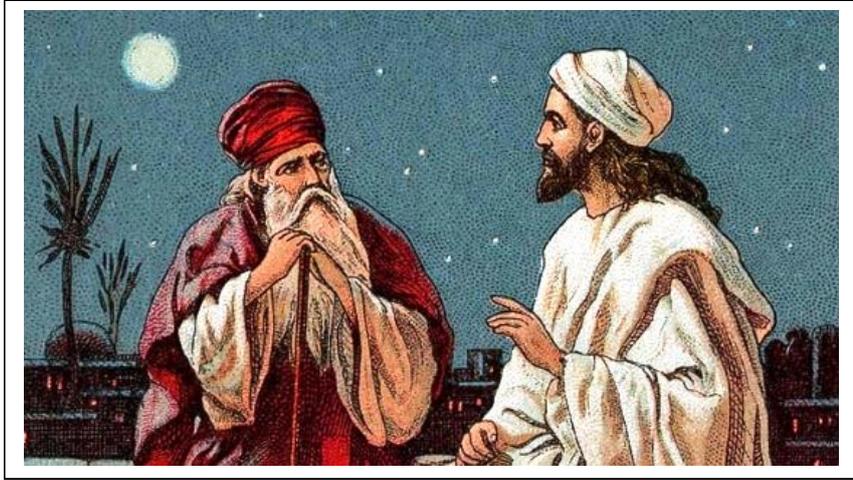


Second Week of Easter

Monday 20th April



First reading

Acts 4:23-31

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly

As soon as Peter and John were released they went to the community and told them everything the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard it they lifted up their voice to God all together. ‘Master,’ they prayed ‘it is you who made heaven and earth and sea, and everything in them; you it is who said through the Holy Spirit and speaking through our ancestor David, your servant:

*Why this arrogance among the nations,
these futile plots among the peoples?
Kings on earth setting out to war,
princes making an alliance,
against the Lord and against his Anointed.*

‘This is what has come true: in this very city Herod and Pontius Pilate made an alliance with the pagan nations and the peoples of Israel, against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, but only to bring about the very thing that you in your strength and your wisdom had predetermined should happen. And now, Lord, take note of their threats and help your servants to proclaim your message with all boldness, by stretching out your hand to heal and to work miracles and marvels through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ As they prayed, the house where they were assembled rocked; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly.

Gospel Acclamation

Col3:1

Alleluia, alleluia!
Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ,
you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is,
sitting at God’s right hand.
Alleluia!

Gospel

John 3:1-8

Unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God

There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leading Jew, who came to Jesus by night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him.’ Jesus answered:

‘I tell you most solemnly,
unless a man is born from above,
he cannot see the kingdom of God.’

Nicodemus said, ‘How can a grown man be born? Can he go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?’
Jesus replied:

‘I tell you most solemnly,
unless a man is born through water and the Spirit,
he cannot enter the kingdom of God:
what is born of the flesh is flesh;
what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
Do not be surprised when I say:
You must be born from above.
The wind blows wherever it pleases;
you hear its sound,
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit.’

Fr Tim’s Reflection

In the readings this week, the first reading describes the exploits of Peter and John as they boldly proclaim the message of the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Gospel narrates the discussion between Jesus and a reluctant Pharisee called Nicodemus.

Peter and John were arrested for curing a cripple by the gate of the Temple. Before the whole Sanhedrin they have a chance to witness to the fact that Jesus, the man they crucified, rose again from the dead. They are released, but warned not to preach again in the name of Jesus. This warning does not stop them. That they had been arrested and detained only serves as a spur to their apostolic activity. It makes them fearless.

Today we hear of an unholy alliance between the religious authorities, Herod, Pilate and the gentile nations to put a stop to this fledgling movement, which was then called “the followers of the way”. As they pray, the house that they are in rocks and the Holy Spirit fills them with courage and with power.

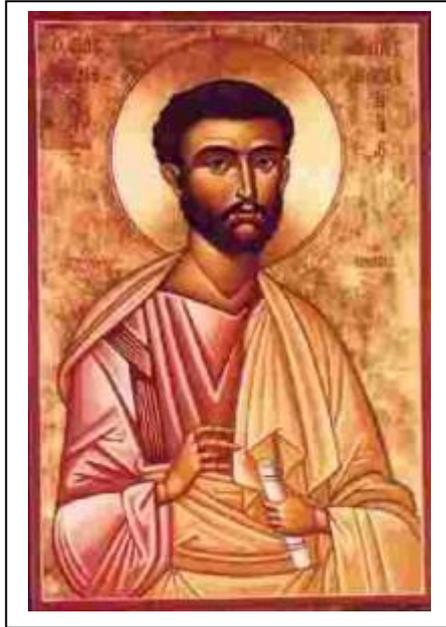
During this period of lockdown we realise that we have a ministry of prayer. It may seem that we are at home doing nothing, but we can use this time to pray for the world. We can hold up to God the courage of those on the front line fighting the virus, those who are ill, those who are bereaved, those who are challenged by this situation and those suffering from the economic consequences of these difficult times. We too can feel our house rock as we are filled with the Holy Spirit and given power.

The Gospel relates the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a member of the council, but is curious about Jesus. He does not want to be seen to be associating with Jesus, so he comes to see him at night. He is startled as Jesus tells him he must be “born again” from above. We have just celebrated Easter, the festival of religious rebirth. Our rebirth needs to be constantly renewed – embracing more and more the ways of Jesus and letting go of the ways of the earth.

Let’s pray for our rebirth, that we may be strong witnesses to the word, and through our prayers of intercession, agents of change in the world.

Second Week of Easter

Tuesday 21st April



Acts 4:32-37

First reading

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common.

The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect.

None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need.

There was a Levite of Cypriot origin called Joseph whom the apostles surnamed Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He owned a piece of land and he sold it and brought the money, and presented it to the apostles.

cf.Rv1:5

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

You, O Christ, are the faithful witness,
the First-born from the dead,

you have loved us and have washed away our sins with your blood.

Alleluia!

Gospel

John 3:7-15

No-one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man who has come down from heaven

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

'Do not be surprised when I say:

You must be born from above.

The wind blows wherever it pleases;

you hear its sound,

but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit.’

‘How can that be possible?’ asked Nicodemus. ‘You, a teacher in Israel, and you do not know these things!’ replied Jesus.

‘I tell you most solemnly,
we speak only about what we know
and witness only to what we have seen
and yet you people reject our evidence.
If you do not believe me when I speak about things in this world,
how are you going to believe me when I speak to you about heavenly things?
No one has gone up to heaven
except the one who came down from heaven,
the Son of Man who is in heaven;
and the Son of Man must be lifted up
as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.’

Fr Tim’s Reflection

One of those who joins the group of believers is a man named Barnabas (his icon is above). Later he will become a companion of St Paul, and accompany him on his first missionary journey to the ends of the earth. Today, he is having his first initiation into the group of believers. He has a piece of land which he sells and presents the disciples with the proceeds of the sale.

In those early years of the Christian faith, those who joined the church sold their possessions. These followers of the way shared everything in common. No one was ever in need as everyone looked after everyone else.

One of the good things to come out of the current crisis is how we are looking after each other. In our community here in this corner of Lancashire, no one is in need and many people are eager to help in whatever way they can. It has taken this virus to bring us back to having a taste of the community of the first Christians. We realise that our material possessions are not ours, but on loan to us, and to be shared with others whose need is greater than ours.

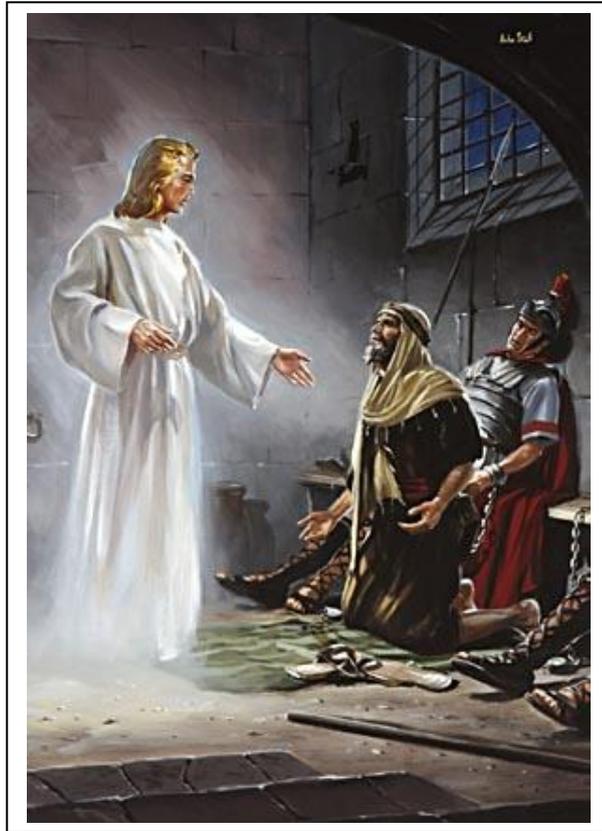
In the Gospel, the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus continues. Nicodemus does not understand how a man can be born again for a second time. He is thinking only of physical birth and not Spiritual rebirth.

Jesus alludes to an episode in the Old Testament where the people of Israel were being attacked by Fiery Serpents. As Moses lifted up a serpent so that the Israelites could be healed, so to Jesus was to be lifted up to enable our healing from sin. Jesus would be lifted up on the cross, at the resurrection and again at his ascension into heaven. Gazing upon him allows his healing power to grow strong within us.

The Fiery Serpent of the Old Testament has become the symbol of the medical profession. Many doctors and nurses wear that symbol on their lapels. This is a reminder today for us to pray for those on the front line fighting the virus. A serpent they cannot see! Let’s pray that the Lord will protect them as they work to bring healing to many.

Second Week of Easter

Wednesday 22nd April



First reading

Acts 5:17-26

The men you imprisoned are in the Temple, preaching to the people

The high priest intervened with all his supporters from the party of the Sadducees. Prompted by jealousy, they arrested the apostles and had them put in the common gaol.

But at night the angel of the Lord opened the prison gates and said as he led them out, 'Go and stand in the Temple, and tell the people all about this new Life.' They did as they were told; they went into the Temple at dawn and began to preach.

When the high priest arrived, he and his supporters convened the Sanhedrin – this was the full Senate of Israel – and sent to the gaol for them to be brought. But when the officials arrived at the prison they found they were not inside, so they went back and reported, 'We found the gaol securely locked and the warders on duty at the gates, but when we unlocked the door we found no one inside.' When the captain of the Temple and the chief priests heard this news they wondered what this could mean. Then a man arrived with fresh news. 'At this very moment' he said, 'the men you imprisoned are in the Temple. They are standing there preaching to the people.' The captain went with his men and fetched them. They were afraid to use force in case the people stoned them.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

Christ has risen and shone upon us
whom he redeemed with his blood.

Alleluia!

Gospel**God sent his Son into the world so that through him the world might be saved**

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

‘God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,
 so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost
 but may have eternal life.
 For God sent his Son into the world
 not to condemn the world,
 but so that through him the world might be saved.
 No one who believes in him will be condemned;
 but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already,
 because he has refused to believe in the name of God’s only Son.
 On these grounds is sentence pronounced:
 that though the light has come into the world
 men have shown they prefer darkness to the light
 because their deeds were evil.
 And indeed, everybody who does wrong
 hates the light and avoids it,
 for fear his actions should be exposed;
 but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light,
 so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.’

Fr Tim’s Reflection

Again in the first reading, Peter and John are arrested and put in prison. You cannot chain up the Good News of the Lord. With the appearance of an angel, the doors are thrown open and the prisoners escape. Instead of running away, the very next day they are back in the temple preaching again.

However, it is the Gospel that is really important today. Nicodemus has failed to understand what it means to be born again. Jesus reveals to him (and to us as well) the core of his message. God so loves the world that he chooses to send us his Son. God’s motive is love. And the reason for sending the Son is laid bare: So that we may not be lost but have life. Jesus unmasks God and his intentions. He makes his motives clear. He places in the spotlight a God who is motivated not by revenge or a desire to punish, but only by a desire for us to know him and his love.

Remember, Nicodemus was the one who came at night; this was because he was afraid. In his first letter, John reminds us that *perfect love drives out all fear*. We can go to Jesus as ones who are afraid, but we cannot remain that way for long.

During this pandemic we find that many people are afraid. Supposing I catch the virus: will I die? I fear for my family and my loved ones. I’m afraid about whether things will ever get back to normal. Will I still have a job, a house, a place in society? Many people have spent many years working for a standard of life, and now all of that work is at risk. We are afraid.

But wait: *perfect love drives out all fear!* One thing the pandemic is doing is stripping away things we hold dear, things we depend upon, things that constitute who we think we are. In this stripped down version of ourselves we have the chance to encounter God in a way we have never seen him before. If Jesus is my friend, I can face the uncertain future in faith, knowing he will be with me. Yes, we don’t know what tomorrow will hold, but we do know that we can face it with Jesus. We pray for the gift of faith.

Second Week of Easter

Thursday 23rd April

Feast of St George



First reading

Acts 5:27-33

We are witnesses to all this, we and the Holy Spirit

When the officials had brought the apostles in to face the Sanhedrin, the high priest demanded an explanation. 'We gave you a formal warning' he said 'not to preach in this name, and what have you done? You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and seem determined to fix the guilt of this man's death on us.' In reply Peter and the apostles said, 'Obedience to God comes before obedience to men; it was the God of our ancestors who raised up Jesus, but it was you who had him executed by hanging on a tree. By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and saviour, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel. We are witnesses to all this, we and the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.'

This so infuriated them that they wanted to put them to death.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

Christ has risen, he who created all things,
and has granted his mercy to men.

Alleluia!

John 3:31-36

Gospel

The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to him

John the Baptist said to his disciples:

'He who comes from above is above all others;
he who is born of the earth is earthly himself
and speaks in an earthly way.'

He who comes from heaven
bears witness to the things he has seen and heard,
even if his testimony is not accepted;
though all who do accept his testimony
are attesting the truthfulness of God,
since he whom God has sent
speaks God's own words:
God gives him the Spirit without reserve.
The Father loves the Son
and has entrusted everything to him.
Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life,
but anyone who refuses to believe in the Son will never see life:
the anger of God stays on him.'

Fr Tim's Reflection

When I am showing a group of children round St Peter's church, I usually offer a chocolate bar to the first one who finds the dragon! Of course he is at the bottom of the stained glass window where we honour the patron saint of England, St George. Today is his feast day. As far as we know, he never set foot in England, but he so inspired those who went to fight in the crusades, that they chose to fight under his banner (which has now become the flag of England). George was a gallant fighter who defeated evil, represented by the dragon. Something of George's character has come to represent what is best about the spirit of our country. Today's gallant fighters are battling a much tinier foe, but one just as deadly – covid-19.

The apostles, arrested a second time, are brought before the religious authorities and made to account for their action. They use this as an opportunity to witness: The one who was hanged on a tree has been raised up to bring forgiveness. Obedience to God is more important than obedience to man. We see and are inspired by their courage.

In the Gospel, Jesus foresees that there will be times when the testimony of those born from above will not be accepted. Being true to the faith that has been passed on to us gives us the opportunity to be true to God.

Jesus talks about the generosity of God. God gives the spirit without reserve. That is to say, without holding back. Perhaps, when we ask for gifts, we want God to give us courage, generosity, valour – but not too much. Yet God longs to give without reserve.

On this feast day of St George we ask for the gifts we need in the current situation, the gifts our country needs. Be ready! God will give his Spirit without reserve.

Once more this evening we can remember the courage of our NHS workers. As you go to your front door to clap or to bang a pot, send a prayer in their direction. Thank God for them and ask him to keep them safe.

Second Week of Easter

Friday 24th April



Acts 5:34-42

First reading

They were glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name

One member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee called Gamaliel, who was a doctor of the Law and respected by the whole people, stood up and asked to have the apostles taken outside for a time. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin, 'Men of Israel, be careful how you deal with these people. There was Theudas who became notorious not so long ago. He claimed to be someone important, and he even collected about four hundred followers; but when he was killed, all his followers scattered and that was the end of them. And then there was Judas the Galilean, at the time of the census, who attracted crowds of supporters; but he got killed too, and all his followers dispersed. What I suggest, therefore, is that you leave these men alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God.'

His advice was accepted; and they had the apostles called in, gave orders for them to be flogged, warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin glad to have had the honour of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name.

They preached every day both in the Temple and in private houses, and their proclamation of the Good News of Christ Jesus was never interrupted.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia, alleluia!

We know that Christ is truly risen from the dead:
have mercy on us, triumphant King.

Alleluia!

The feeding of the five thousand

Jesus went off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee – or of Tiberias – and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside, and sat down there with his disciples. It was shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover.

Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, ‘Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?’ He only said this to test Philip; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, ‘Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each.’ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said, ‘There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that between so many?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Make the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and gave them out to all who were sitting ready; he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, ‘Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing gets wasted.’ So they picked them up, and filled twelve hampers with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, ‘This really is the prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, escaped back to the hills by himself.

Fr Tim’s Reflection

At last some common sense prevails in the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel, a respected member, urges a de-escalation of the situation. He sees the disciples as a group of hot-headed fanatics, who will eventually run out of steam. Leave them to their own devices for without their leader, Jesus, they will lose focus and the problem will solve itself. However, he realises that there is also the possibility that this new group is from God. If they take on this group, they might find themselves taking on God himself. His words are accepted. The apostles are released and they give praise for the opportunity of suffering humility for the sake of the name. For a while, at least, the group is free to preach the word unhindered.

In the Gospel we jump from Chapter 3 of John to Chapter 6. This is sometimes referred to as the “bread of life” discourse and it begins with an account of the well-known story of the feeding of the 5,000.

This is one of the few events in the life of Jesus that is reported by all four gospel writers. Jesus is busy preaching all day in some lonely spot. Time slips by. The disciples urge sending the people home. Jesus decides to feed them out of the meagre resources that they find: five barley loaves and two fish.

John’s version of the story is different from that of the other writers in that it is a small boy who comes forward with his lunchbox. He gives it to Andrew, who passes it on to Jesus. It is through the generosity of this lad that Jesus is able to perform the miracle.

God’s power is mighty, but somehow chained up. He requires our co-operation so that his miraculous power can be unleashed. We see a modern day equivalent of this miracle today in Captain Tom, who is celebrating his 100th birthday. Like the boy in the story, he did not have much, but what he had he gave of fully. He set himself a target of raising £1,000 for the NHS by walking 100 laps of his garden. He has raised countless millions. He is amazed. The boy in the story must have been similarly astounded when his lunch box fed not just the 5,000 people, but also there were 12 baskets full of scraps left over. God can never be outdone in his generosity. How does he want to be generous to me today?