

OPENING COLLECT

God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son: grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Acts 17.22-31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." 29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

You may or may not agree that reading through Acts, during the Easter period, has been very rewarding. It has helped us to see that Easter is not just about celebrating the resurrection of Christ but also about celebrating the new life that is the gift of God; our gift, which is to be shared with all the world! This, certainly, is what we see happening in today's passage. Paul is undertaking what one might call "perceptive evangelism". He knows what he wants to say and, first, he finds an opportunity, the Areopagus. Next, he is sensitive to the present position of his Gentile listeners. He acknowledges that they are not far from the truth. Having, thus, started from "common ground", their acknowledgement of the unknown god, he then shows them how far his God surpasses all that they now know, religious people though they are. Thus he shares Good News as he makes known the unknown and opens up new possibilities for them. He does not convict them of sin and make them feel bad. He looks for a response from them, setting his proclamation in the context of the approaching judgement. His sensitive dialogue with them is exemplary; the urgency with which he pursues it is a challenge to us.

SECOND READING: 1 Peter 3.13-22

13 Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed.

Peter, as we have seen before, is writing to young Christians, perhaps using old sermon material from a baptismal liturgy, and he is also writing to those, who would appear to be being persecuted for their faith. The key would seem to lie in verse

Epistle continued: Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. **OR** Gen.8.20-9.17

Gospel: John 14.15–21

Jesus said to his disciples:
¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.
¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.
¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.
¹⁸ I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.
¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.
²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.
²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

17. 'Keep your conscience clear so that if and when the call comes, you can suffer patiently, rather than hit out: repay evil with good, if you like, following the example of Christ. The point is that, although Christ was 'put to death in the flesh' he was 'made alive in the spirit', and so wrought salvation for all. So they, and we, having been baptised are saved by the waters of baptism, through the resurrection of Christ. They and we are now in a blessed state, which nothing can take from us, provided we live by trust and with love. If that is true, then they, and we, should, like Christ, be able to work for salvation, even in times of duress, provided we keep facing God and trusting in his love.

OR This final passage from the 'flood story' contains an important insight. Compare v.21 with 6.5, and realise that God must accept that human nature is unchanged by the flood. The only way to find fullness of life is to turn to God and trust in his love.

And so to our Gospel, which is part of the 'Final Discourse' of Jesus, chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel. It is part sermon and part prayer, and in it he prepares the disciples for his death, or, perhaps, more appropriately, for his departure, and for their future role. When he has 'gone' they will not be orphaned, verse 18, that is to say, not be like people without a 'father'. To understand the full import of this, we need to recall that, in the Scriptures (OT), the leader of a group of disciples could be referred to as their 'father'. Such a person would be their mentor, if you like, their teacher, guru or guide, and would stamp his (or her of course) mark on them. So, when Saul starts prophesying, after being anointed by Samuel, the people ask "and who is (his) father?" (1 Samuel 10.12). So now, Jesus is saying that, though he may not physically be present to lead them, yet his disciples will continue to walk his way, will continue under his guidance, through the Spirit, which will keep them united to him, if they live by love.

Post-Communion Collect

God our Father, whose Son Jesus Christ gives the water of eternal life: may we thirst for you, the spring of life and source of goodness, through him who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. **Amen.**