

Sermon

by the Rt Revd Paul Thomas SSC, Bishop of Oswestry
at the Forward in Faith Festival 2023

Friends, we hear in today's Gospel how the Risen Saviour – 'on the first day of the week' - appears in the midst of his frightened Apostles. 'On the first day of the week', note. Something wholly new is begun. In the Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus nothing less a new creation comes into being, a new age inaugurated. The world as it was is not the world as it has come to be, because Christ is risen.

But the Apostles – they are trapped in the upper room of the way things were – the world as it was – they know not the newness of life that Christ has won for them. The doors are locked – why? -for fear of the Jews, we are told. *Fear* has caused the Eleven to flee and barricade themselves away. Heads down, hearts low, embattled on every side, the Eleven seek sanctuary with what and whom they know –a small band of the like-minded locked away from the rest of the world: fear, not love, reigns in their minds and wills. This is precisely what fear does to us: it causes us to move in the most destructive direction, inwardly; fear always causes us to turn in, and then cave-in upon ourselves. And when we are so ruled by fear, so inwardly oriented, we look out at the world around us not in hope and thanksgiving but with suspicion, resentment, and defensiveness. It is why fear is shrinks the soul and fuels all sin.

Now, it is into the very midst of the Apostles' fear that the Risen One steps; they do not open the door to him (they cannot, fear prevents them – this detail in the Gospel - the locked doors - perfectly expresses the spiritual dynamics of fear, this inward turning). But rather it is *Christ's* will and *Christ's* work to break down, break in. What amazing grace!: we cannot break out of the prisons of our fear, the prisons of our sin – only Christ can break in to liberate us from them. Only he can invade; only he can overcome every obstacle we put in his way. He is greater than all our fears; he is stronger than all the locked doors that bar his way into your hearts.

And when he enters in, what does the Lord Jesus do? He shows them his hands and his side, making his disciples glad. How often in the resurrection appearances this happens; he shows the Eleven his hands and his side to make it clear that his resurrection from the dead is no blotting out of Good Friday, no erasing of the cross's bloody violence, but that his wounds are his victory over all fear by the conquering power of perfect love. There is a reason why St John, not in his Gospel but in his first letter, says that perfect love casts out fear. If fear is an inward spiritual move, then love is liberatingly extrovert, this is why love liberates us from fear; and God, who is nothing but love - perfect love - perfectly overcomes all fear to conquer it.

Only then, only when the Risen Lord has broken down the prison bars of their fear, and showed to them the saving wounds of his passion now glorified, gladdening their hearts and casting out their fear, only then does he send them, breathing upon them the gift of God the Holy Spirit: 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'. The Son sanctified the Eleven with the Spirit to continue his liberating, reconciling ministry in the world, until he comes again.

That same Sanctifier we invoke in this Mass, that he would descend upon us in the fullness of his grace to confirm, invigorate, inspire and quicken us in our mission and proclamation of him who died upon the cross and rose, Death's conqueror.

It is all here, my friends. Everything you need to know about the challenge that we face, and the response to the challenge that we face, at this moment in the life of the Catholic Movement: we are not called to ever greater introspection, ever greater introversion, ever greater isolation – to lock ourselves away from the world in an upper room of fear and mutual despondency – as seductive a space as that might seem to be for us to inhabit given the abundant discouragements we see writ large in the Church of England. Her drift is our sorrow. Yet, wherever you find that spirit of fear and despondency, or feel it, cry aloud 'Get thee behind me, Satan!', for the Devil loves nothing more than when the Church loses hope and heart. No, we believe in the one who tramples down the doors, who breaks in to dispel fear and manifest his risen power. We believe in the one who sends his Spirit to strengthen his Church in its pilgrimage through this world. He will never forsake nor abandon us.

Our response to the challenges we face is to rise to meet them, of course, with a bold and reinvigorated confidence. We have nothing to fear – Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Death and Hell are overthrown, and the gate of life is opened to those who believe. Now is the time to live our catholic life at its highest pitch and greatest intensity. Only by radical renewal can we meet the evangelistic task before us. Now is not the time for decaffeinated Catholicism: only full-fat, full-on, full-faith, full-throttle Catholicism will do. If we are to go out into the world as the Saviour commanded us to do, fearlessly; if we are to be renewed in the strength we once had; and if we are to recall the Church of England back to herself, then we must first go deeper into Christ. This means a radical obedience to the Catholic Faith; radical witness to the compassion of Christ in works of charity; radical discipline in prayer and in receiving the sanctifying gifts of the Sacraments (we must live in such a way that shows we cannot live without them!); radical trust in God's providence and full surrender to his will for us; radical personal holiness. In short, we must consecrate the whole of our lives anew to Christ our God.

May the explosive, expulsive power of God the Holy Spirit whom we invoke in this Votive Mass strengthen us in the high task ahead.