

## ON KEEPING CALM AND CARRYING ON<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 17 May 2020**

I was last in this church on 29 March, the Fifth Sunday of Lent and the second of our online services. I had already participated in the first online Eucharist and had no idea yet what it might be like to be on the receiving end of such a service.

It's not that I had expected to have been here every Sunday since then. We were supposed to have returned last week from the cancelled Choir Pilgrimage to Spain. I had expected that this sermon would contain some reflections on our joint experiences.

Instead, I have, like most of you, experienced the strange reality of online worship. On the first occasion, my throat constricted as I found myself more a spectator than a participant in an event that is such a part of my life; alone with Bev and apart from the community of St James. I've grown more accustomed to the experience, but I still find it strange to make responses without hearing the voices of those around me or to sing without others. I am also beginning to understand the reality that faces everyone who becomes cut off from their spiritual community; those who are ill or too far away.

What we see online is familiar but significantly different. The restriction on the number of persons participating conflicts with the real meaning of the term "liturgy", the "work" of the people of God. We lose that visible sense of a group who, clergy, assistants, servers, choristers and congregation, are workers at their labour. I greatly miss the smell of the church.

On the other hand, I have found comfort in what contemporary technology can bring us when we are otherwise isolated. The well-known liturgy is comforting and reassuring. Although I can neither see nor hear my fellow parishioners, I know that they are there, along with a surprising number of others who have chosen to be part of the St James online experience.

Our smaller services are also now online. A good number of us, who could never make it to the church at 8.30am each weekday morning, have joined together in online Morning Prayer. Perhaps some of our emergency procedures have revealed new ways of communication and community that we should not quickly discard when things return to their former state.

In an interview on YouTube, Rowan Williams raised a paradox in that, on the one hand, we have discovered that our connections do not depend solely on being physically present to each other. At the same time, however, our online worship has enhanced our appreciation of being physically present. Although we must decide to come to church each Sunday, online services require us to take a different kind of responsibility for our worship when we don't have the familiar props.<sup>2</sup>

COVID-19 has struck at least one of our parish families and some of us may have friends, either here or overseas, who have been touched by the virus. We may regard ourselves as lucky but we share vulnerability with all our fellow humans.

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-19; 1 Peter 3:8-22; John 14:15-21

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MV7JWQ1fxNA>

Writing this week in *Eureka Street*, the online Jesuit journal, Andrew Hamilton commented on how we respond to uncertainty. He said:

In easy times truth can easily be identified with certainty ... These certainties wash away in the face of a storm threatening life and all human activities. They will not protect us from the things that threaten our health, our solidarity as a community and our economic security.

What matters now is personal truth—the coherence between words and life, the trustworthiness of those who will lead us through the dark ... It would be easy and lazy to aim at restoring the institutions and settings that prevailed year ago. To seek the good of each person within the common good in a changed world requires a steady heart and human wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

These reflections have been provoked by our readings today, which all seem to converge on the one point, the life of a community. When I began to read the epistle from 1 Peter, I was immediately struck with the opening words: “have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind”.<sup>4</sup> This letter was written to Christians in Asia Minor. Those communities were far from homogenous. Some parts were highly influenced by the wider Hellenistic and Roman culture. Other areas were hardly affected at all. The educated spoke Greek, but in many places, the native languages were still spoken.

This was a church that reflected the diversity of its society. The author’s exhortation towards unity was both necessary and theologically driven. Should the tensions of the larger society be prominent in the emerging church community, disaster might ensue. Of particular importance is the instruction to have a humble mind. Hellenistic society was built on pride and social status. Humility was seen as weakness, yet the very mixture of backgrounds made it essential.

In the reading from Acts, Paul is addressing that Hellenistic society directly. His approach is interesting and instructive. He entered into their world, even quoting from some Hellenistic writers. He did not stand off from them, lecturing them from an apparently superior position. He identified with what he saw as a common search for meaning and for some overarching identity. In offering his own approach, he stood beside his hearers, not over against them.

We have used only a portion of Psalm 66 today. That portion begins as a reflection by God’s people on a delivery from hard times. It does not refer to any particular time of trial, but it is one that affected the nation as a whole. Then, the tone changes from a communal to a personal reflection. Since the author is not known, we are not sure of the relationship between the national and personal thanksgivings but we should not be surprised that they are joined together. We share with others but experience life personally. Thus, we acknowledge how our community life has been torn apart while recognising that the general isolation has affected each of us differently. Some have found it not only stressful but dangerous.

Finally, we come to our gospel reading, which is from the long reflection that John has Jesus make after Judas has left the Last Supper. This part of the reflection deals with the link between love and faithfulness. Jesus says to his disciples that, if they love him, they will keep his commandments. Actually, Jesus was rather short on commandments. There is no code similar to that recorded in the Hebrew books Deuteronomy and Leviticus. We know what his

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-truths-beyond-uncertainty?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%202014%20May%202020&utm\\_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%202014%20May%202020+CID\\_22b4e349c3e9a680c13cf0021d48bf1c&utm\\_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm\\_term=READ%20MORE#](https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-truths-beyond-uncertainty?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%202014%20May%202020&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%202014%20May%202020+CID_22b4e349c3e9a680c13cf0021d48bf1c&utm_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm_term=READ%20MORE#)

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 3:8

commandments are because we have heard them today, as we regularly do in the Eucharist: love God absolutely and love your neighbour as yourself. And we know that, when he washed his disciples' feet, Jesus gave them a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you".<sup>5</sup> When we love Jesus and follow his commandments, we will find the Holy Spirit abiding in us.

In summary, therefore, today's readings say to us: live in unity, have tender hearts and humble minds. Be thankful, both corporately and individually. Stand alongside each other and, above all, love each other.

In today's gospel, Jesus also foreshadows the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift is the context in which we live out the teaching from today's readings. I give you Kevin Hart's poem about the enigmatic nature of God's gifts.

One day the gift arrives—outside your door,  
Left on a windowsill, inside the mailbox,  
Or in the hallway, far too large to lift.

Your postman shrugs his shoulders, the police  
Consult a statute, and the cat miaows,  
No name, no signature, no address,

Only, 'To you, my dearest one, my all ...'  
One day it fits snugly in your pocket,  
Then fills the backyard like afternoon in Spring.

Monday morning, and it's there at work—  
Already ahead of you, or left behind  
Amongst the papers, files and photographs;

And were there lipstick smudges down the side  
Or have they just appeared? What a headache!  
And worse, people have begun to talk:

'You lucky thing!' they say, or roll their eyes.  
Nights find you combing the directory  
(A glass of straw-coloured wine upon the desk)

Still hoping to chance upon a forgotten name.  
Yet mornings see you happier than before—  
After all, the gift has set you up for life.

Impossible to tell, now, what was given  
And what was not: slivers of rain on the window,  
Those gold-tooled Oeuvres of Diderot on the shelf,

The strawberry dreaming in a champagne flute—  
Were they part of the gift or something else?  
Or is the gift still coming, on its way?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 13:34

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Hart, 'The Gift', in Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994 p. 92.