17 May 2020: Sunday Worship
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21
The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

Words of Christ from the gospel we have just heard: ‘because I live, you also will live’.

In nomine…

Last Sunday I was back in Manchester as guest preacher in the church where I served my curacy twenty years ago. That church – Holy Innocents’, Fallowfield – has been formative of my priesthood. It continues to mean a great deal to me and it was a delight to be back there in the company of old friends.

Except of course that I wasn’t back in Manchester at all: I was in front of a computer screen here in Christ Church. But the really odd thing is that – both as I pre-recorded my sermon into the phone and as I sat listening to the service at 10 o’clock last Sunday – it was absolutely clear to me that I was worshipping in Fallowfield, not in Oxford, ‘The Church is people, not buildings’, we say. But, as Angela Tilby pointed out in last week’s Church Times, that won’t really do. The Church is people, of course; but people are flesh and blood in time and space and we form attachments to particular places that shape us. Holy Innocents’, Fallowfield has shaped me: it’s a community of people and a place to which I belong – and last Sunday I knew myself to be back there.

So today I pray that we too know ourselves to be in Christ Church Cathedral (though none actually is). Not because we have made this beautiful place an idol – ‘he who is Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands’ – but because this is the place in which we have let God find us. It is the holy ground before the burning bush, where, like Moses, we take of our shoes (metaphorically of course – fastidious cathedral Anglicans that we are!); this is the rock of ages, cleft for us; the stone on which we lay our heads and, like Jacob, behold angels ascending and descending; this is our Galilee, our Gethsemane, our Calvary, our garden of the resurrection. The scriptures leave us in no doubt that we may not linger here for ever – we must leave the mountain of transfiguration and descend to the plain – but we are right to savour the
time we have in this place. Here where, as in every act of prayer and worship, we are with God, as God is always with us.

‘Because I live, you also will live’, says Jesus in today’s gospel. It’s worth noting the grammatical tenses there: Jesus is alive; we shall be alive. The two statements are intimately connected and they follow one from the other, but while the first is true now, the second is yet to be fully realised: because Jesus lives, we also shall live. Many of us, much of the time – and all of us, some of the time – are less than fully alive: we exist, but we don’t live. Especially at the moment, the circumstances in which we find ourselves may well be hampering and constricting ones. But even in normal times, we are congenitally prone to existing instead of living: preoccupied by anxiety, fear, pride, envy, anger, and all the other passions which, necessary in themselves, somehow come to squeeze the real life out of us. And yet ‘Christ is risen’, we say, not ‘Christ has risen’. Past event it certainly was, but just as importantly Christ’s defeat of death is a present invitation. ‘Because I live, you also will live’: live, that is, with the abundant life, life in all its fullness, life that really is life, that is the gift of the risen one.

We know this, but how do we live it? Mindfulness offers one answer: it teaches us to dwell deeply in the present moment, to feel the ground under our feet, the beat of our pulse, the breath in our bodies. All well and good, but let’s not idolise the present moment. Better, I believe to see time and place eucharistically: to relate to the whole of our lives – past, present and future – as they are given to us afresh in the wonderful sacrament that we celebrate now. The bread and the wine of the eucharist are gifts that – taken, broken, blessed and shared – show us what it means to be truly alive: open to God and to all that is God’s, ready always to say Amen. Or in words of Dag Hammarskold, much-beloved of Martyn our Dean: ‘For all that has been, thanks. To all that shall be, yes!’

In nomine…