

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter Year A**  
**Acts 17.22-31; John 14:15-21**  
**Revd Steph Nadarajah**

‘In the week before lockdown started’, wrote one of my favourite newspaper columnists last week, ‘when we all knew it was coming but didn’t know what it would consist of, or how it would feel when it was actually happening – we did many things.’ (Caitin Moran, The Times, 08.05.20).

Indeed we did. Naturally, I brought my hair appointment forward sharpish. I bought some secateurs, gardening gloves and grass seed. Other people, in their much greater wisdom (Rebecca Timmis and Alison Charlton) supplied me with craft materials, and a relative offered us access to her Disney Plus subscription. The columnist in question confessed to having bought – amongst other things – a wheelbarrow, a tapestry kit and a yoghurt maker....

So, what did you do? And, perhaps more importantly now, what do you wish you’d done? I wish I’d hugged everyone with reckless abandon, and that’s pretty much it. But the fact is, before it actually happened, most of us couldn’t anticipate what it would feel like, and what would emerge as important within it.

To ground those things which we cannot make sense of in the realm of the material, is - I think - a deeply human thing to do. We see that reflected, time and time again, in art and in music. But we know, too, that our motivations are not always noble. Sometimes, we may grasp after things, places and people to keep at bay feelings of despondency, loneliness, shame, fear or anger. Bingeing on Netflix, shopping online....I could go on.

The apostle Paul had kept his own fears at bay by persecuting Christians, before he became one himself on the road to Damascus. Paul (or, Saul as he was back then) held everyone’s coats while they stoned Stephen to death for his faith in Jesus: we heard about that last week. And now, here he is (in our first reading from Acts), utterly transformed and standing in front of the Aeropagus – a large rocky outcropping - in Athens, addressing a crowd of sophisticated Greeks.

At first, he seems to flatter the Athenians by praising their religious ways; their worshipping life, their altars. But then he turns it around and tells them that, actually, their altars are useless. He talks to them, instead, about the Lord of heaven and earth who doesn't reside in shrines, altars or anything of human origin. He tells them that the God for whom they grasp and grope and search is closer to them than they are to themselves. And he gives them a message that is hard for them to stomach: this self-same God is calling them into a relationship of truth and justice.

To ground the things we cannot understand in material things is a deeply human thing to do, and we have always done it. That's because we are sensory beings. We appreciate that more than ever now, don't we? The loss of touch feels particularly painful: our inability to hold onto the people we love. But, sometimes, the material things in which we place our trust – the material things in which we seek to locate God, even – can blind us to the truth at the heart of the Trinity. That God is relational. And, as Paul said last week, God is about connection.

Time and time again, Jesus tries to help his friends to realise this. Our Gospel reading today is one of those occasions. In spite of their anxiety and fear, Jesus holds them in this liminal space between his life and his death and invites them to consider the possibility that, even when he's not with them anymore, they might just discover new ways of relating in his absence. New ways of relating in and through the one whom Jesus calls the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if you'll indulge me, for a moment, in an imaginative exercise. Could you cast your mind back to the end of March....and could you imagine Jesus speaking to you about the new ways of relating that you're about to discover in lockdown? Could you imagine Jesus taking away your fear (and, gently too, your credit card) and showing you what you are about to learn about yourself, about him, about the community in which you live, during this time of felt absence and longing?

My brilliant colleague and friend, Paul Timmis, introduced me this week to The Holy Shed – a weekly broadcast from the shed of the retired priest and writer Dave Tomlinson. I think it was something to do with the fact that Paul got a mention that he wanted me to watch it, and so, naturally, I did.

Each week, at the end of his broadcast, Dave invites participants to grab a drink and a snack and to share a moment of communion with him. A dram of whisky or a cup of tea, whatever it happens to be, Dave invites those gathered virtually in his shed to consider everything a sacrament and to delight in it. Now, those of you who know me well will know that I do things very much by the rules. So, I surprised myself by taking up the invitation this week, pausing the video, making a cup of tea, fetching an oatcake and sharing in Dave's communion.

And God was there. And my heart felt a little bit bigger because of it. And no, don't worry, we won't be doing anything so unorthodox when we're back in church, because this wasn't about replicating something that happens in church. It was about finding new ways of connecting in the absence of something we treasure. My point (and the apostle Paul's, and Jesus's...) is that God is much more about relationality and connection than God is about shrines.

There will have been some really difficult times for us all over these past two months – heart-breaking losses. But there will also have been the most profound moments of deep relating, achieved through extraordinary means, and in the absence of things and people.

Whatever this experience feels like for you, I hope that you have found, at times and in unexpected places, the presence of Christ with you, the movement of the Holy Spirit between you, and the Creator God at work around you.

**Amen.**