

## ***Compassion and Truth – a personal message from Fr.Frank for Pentecost 2021***

Dear brothers and sisters,

The feast of Pentecost which we celebrate today is, above all, one of transformation. The first apostles of Our Lord were frightened, anxious and unsure people, locked away for safety and not knowing what to do next. We are not in a dissimilar position ourselves at the moment. Some people are still locked away in their homes, some elderly ones are virtually ‘imprisoned’ there by their children, others are locked in their own minds and hearts, disillusioned and angry. What happened to those disciples when the Spirit came was life-changing: their fear disappeared, they were full of the Lord, enabled to speak of him and proclaim his name in many languages and eventually to go all over the world as it was to do so, suffering gladly ‘for the sake of the name’. Could we say this of ourselves at the moment? Have we received the Spirit? Do we want to? Has the ‘Spirit of truth’ come for us? Do we feel the need to be transformed like Jesus’ first friends? Are we ready for the life-changing experience that is involved in this process? Certainly, our lives have been transformed in the last 18 months in an unprecedented and often deeply painful way, but has that made any difference to us? Has it enabled us to face up to the truth of who we are, what we have been and who we might yet be as we emerge slowly from this time of darkness?

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted a situation that has been slowly developing almost imperceptibly for years. As a society we have become incredibly inward-looking and, as Pope Francis calls it, ‘self-referential’. This has meant that we will do what we want and think what we like and refuse to be questioned or challenged about it. There has developed what we might call a ‘culture of entitlement’ and along with it a ‘culture of complaint’. How many professionals, like our teachers and medical personnel in particular (to say nothing of our bishop and priests!) have been constantly berated by angry people, demanding what they think is their right without any consideration for others, and always seeking an exception to be made from the agreed rules of an agency just for them? Coupled with this, there is also a ‘culture of addiction’, in particular to social media, technological gadgetry and all that goes with it. Our young people seem to be continually attached to their phones to the point that they no longer know how or want to relate to others face to face. There is also a ‘culture of indifference’ to our world and each other. We have blinded ourselves to the suffering of others, shut people out of our country who have escaped from death and suffering, greedily filled our larders with food we do not need ‘just in case’, and started to look ahead to what we can be doing this summer with little thought for those people still on the front-line of suffering, the long-term effects of whose selfless service to us have yet to show themselves, and have taken away the lives of millions of children before they get to be born simply because their birth would be ‘inconvenient’, casually closing our eyes to the true horror of what we have done. How often do we think of the planet we are slowly destroying without being willing to make the changes to our lives that might slow this down or even cure it altogether? What are the implications of this behaviour for ourselves, and our future? Where is there to be true delight and joy for us (except perhaps for a few people last weekend!) rejoicing in meeting each other once again and working together selflessly to make a better world for all of us to live in?

In many ways, we have become cynical and insincere, and this relates particularly to our faith and the practice of it. Very many people now sit lightly to their lives with Our Lord and the practice of their faith in coming to Mass each week as Jesus asked us to. This reflects itself particularly in our attitude to the sacraments – seeking baptism for four year olds without ever having been in a church, simply because it is a passport to what is perceived as the best education in our schools, bringing children for their first and last Communion, young people wanting Confirmation without

ever facing up to what that life-changing process should be, choosing other things to be doing on Sundays and other days because they seem more attractive. Have we ever thought about the implications of such behaviour? What message does this give to those who do faithfully form their children in the Lord's way? Have we ever considered how much we hurt the Lord who loves us and wants to live in us? This week, I came to a personal crossroads in my life, when my dear brother and I became 70 and can now be officially classed as 'elderly'. It was not a happy birthday for me and could not be. I have had to face up to certain things myself, namely that I cannot go along with this behaviour anymore, I cannot keep going, asking for help in doing Our Lord's work in these parishes and continually running up against a brick wall of indifference. In my heart, I cannot simply baptise children of people I have never seen before, or prepare children for First Communion I have never met. In so doing, I would be letting the Lord down as well, as I know I have done frequently in the past and humbly ask his forgiveness. I have to face up to the truth about myself, where I have failed and often hurt others while never intending to do so. I have to find the strength to live with not only this indifference but also the overwhelming sadness of losing so many dear parishioners and friends during the pandemic in particular. Both I and all of us need more than ever this year, the transforming power of the Spirit.

This is Pentecost – it is not about my failure or anyone else's. It is about Jesus, who saved us through his own failure to change the hearts and minds of his hearers. It is about the power of the Spirit, of what God can do for all of us if we only let him and face up to the real truth of what has happened to us. He can, in the words of the beautiful Pentecost prayer 'heal our wounds, our strength renew, on our dryness pour his dew, wash the stain of our sins away, bend the stubborn heart and will, melt the frozen, warm the chill, guide the steps that go astray.' And so I have come to a personal decision, to have one more try before infirmity and age finally takes its toll on me and before I can no longer face up to the continual disappointment of not being able to change people's minds and hearts, and thus have to withdraw from the battle. I will continue to look after our elderly and infirm parishioners and especially the dying with all the love and care that is in me; I will continue to take delight in our beautiful children and cajole their parents to enable them to be fully part of our community at Mass and other occasions; I will rewrite the Confirmation programme with our catechists to reflect the concerns of modern times and engage our young people more deeply and enthusiastically in the life of discipleship; I will enlist the wisdom and help of young families to help plot our future together; I will arrange for our parishes to be looked after without a priest, should and when anything happens to me. I promise you I will try one more time before it is too late for you and me. That is my decision and commitment on this feast day, to the Lord and to you, in the hope that we can all be transformed and re-energised in his service. I realise that many of you reading this will have served our communities faithfully for many years, for which all of us are truly grateful, and I thank you sincerely for all you have been and done, but there are also many more who have not been willing to do so and this is what has caused me such difficulty.

Pope Francis has set out a course for us in his lovely book, "Let us Dream". I am a dreamer in many ways and in the past some of my dreams have come true beautifully, but others have been shattered by indifference or lack of vision from the people I was dreaming for. On this Pentecost day, now 70 years old, I pledge myself to dream again and entrust myself and all of us once more to the power and grace of the Spirit of our loving God: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within us, the fire of your love".

*With my love and prayers to you all, your brother, Fr. Frank*

