

## **Homily: A story to be continued**

As I thought about today's Bible readings, I was reminded of a story I used to enjoy reading to my children when they were little. You might know it: it is called *The Blue Balloon* and it is by Mick Inkpen.

*The day after my birthday party Kipper [my dog] found a soggy blue balloon in the garden. Which is odd because the balloons at my party were red and white.*

*I blew it up.*

*At first I thought it was just an ordinary balloon. But now I am not so sure.*

*It is shiny and squeaky and you can make rude noises with it.*

*And if you give it a rub you can stick it on the ceiling.*

*Just like an ordinary balloon.*

*But there is something odd about my balloon.*

To be continued ...

Don't you hate that? You're watching your favourite TV programme, and it ends without letting you know how the story is going to be sorted out. "To be continued" appears on the screen, and you know you'll have to wait until the next episode to find out who the bad guy really is, or whether the hero is going to survive, or whatever.

It's like when you're reading something and, just when you get to the interesting part, you get interrupted and have to put the book down for a while.

But in some ways "To be continued" is good too. It's good because it signals that there is more to the story. We're not going to be left forever wondering what is odd about the balloon; or wondering who the bad guy really is, or whether the hero is going to survive. The story is going to go on. "To be continued ..."

There is an important “To be continued ...” idea in today’s Bible readings. In John 14, Jesus is talking to his disciples a short time before his arrest, trial, torture and death on a cross. Jesus’ death could have been the end of the story; and everyone thought it was. At that point everyone thought the bad guys had won.

But there was a “To be continued ...”, because after three days of being well and truly dead Jesus was raised to life again: real life, with a real body that could be touched by his friends, a real body that could share breakfast with them. By raising Jesus to life again, God showed that the bad guys didn’t have the real power; God is more powerful still.

But even that wasn’t to be the end of the story. There was another “to be continued ...”. Following on from being raised from death to new life, Jesus went on to be with God in heaven, and sent his Holy Spirit to be with the disciples and all those who follow Jesus. That’s what he promised when he talked to the disciples before his arrest: John 14:16-17 – “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

The Holy Spirit is Jesus’ own inner life. And he gives this life to his followers.

Let me tell you another story – and I promise you this one will go right to the end.

There was once a Year 8 student (that’s Form Two, for those of us who are older) who really enjoyed books – all kinds of books. If he could, Charlie would spend all weekend reading. At school, he liked nothing better than spending his intervals and lunch breaks in the library.

Charlie was seen around the library so much, and clearly appreciated books, so Mrs Marshall, the school librarian, asked him if he would like to be one of the student librarians – helping out with issuing books to the students and processing the returns, helping students to find books they were looking for, keeping the shelves in order, sorting out which books were overdue, and that sort of thing.

There would be a badge to wear when he was in the library. It was quite a nice badge – gold lettering on a cream enamel background, saying, in block capitals “Librarian”. There weren’t very many badges worn in that school, so Charlie thought he would be pretty important. So he agreed, and became a school librarian.

Charlie swelled with pride as Mrs Marshall pinned the badge to his uniform at assembly the following week.

(I could pause here and say, “To be continued”. But I promised not to, so I’ll carry on.)

During one interval towards the end of term Mrs Marshall called Charlie into her office. She looked a bit disappointed. “Charlie,” she asked, “are you a librarian?”

“Yes,” he said, and he puffed out his chest on which the badge was pinned.

Mrs Marshall shook her head. “No, Charlie. It’s not all about the badge or the title. You haven’t been doing what a librarian does. You’ve worn the badge, but you haven’t been helping me or the students. You’ve spent all your time parading up and down, looking important; or sitting here in my office with your nose in a book while all the other librarians get the work done. I made you a librarian; now it’s time to act like one.”

I’ve told this story, which may or may not be completely fictional, to make another important “To be continued ...” point. Just as the resurrection of Jesus wasn’t the end of the story, so too for us choosing to follow Jesus is not the end of the story. Jesus offers us the free gift of eternal life with him; and all we have to do is to accept his gift, and to trust him completely. But if we have accepted his gift, and really mean it, then it’s not a case of just sitting back and saying it’s all “sweet as”. Because being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus, is not just like a badge or a title; it actually means something for how we live our lives.

There is work to do.

To be a Christian means being prepared to suffer in standing up for what we believe is right.

To be a Christian means being able to say why it is we believe we have the promise of life after a time of death.

To be a Christian means doing acts of loving service for others, even when it costs us something – in time or effort or inconvenience or money or whatever.

That's what Peter was talking about in his letter – 1 Peter 3:13-22.

Being a Christian *means* something in this life, as well as in the life to come.

We may have accepted the gift of the “librarian” badge; now we have to live the librarian life.

In last week's Gospel passage Jesus promises that his disciples will do *even greater works* than those he has been doing (John 14:12). The believers can surpass the works that Jesus has been doing because of the crucial event of his death and resurrection. All the works that Jesus had done before his dying and rising could only foreshadow the completed work of Christ on the cross. Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurate the new life, the life of the age to come, in the kingdom of God. So the works performed by followers of Jesus after this new life has been inaugurated are signs and the bringing into reality of this very life.

We are called to share in this. It is part of the outworking of the hope that we have for the renewal of all things. Tom Wright says, “The church that is renewed by the message of Jesus' resurrection must be the church that goes to work ... in ... space, time and matter, and claim it in advance as the place of God's kingdom, of Jesus' lordship, of the power of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

A common thread through this week's readings is that the mission of the church is always everywhere. From proclamation by Paul in Athens, the intellectual capital of the Western world (in Acts 17), to newly baptised Christians getting their discipleship instruction in Palestine and Rome (1 Peter 3), to the disciples with Jesus in Jerusalem being told they will receive the Holy Spirit to go alongside them wherever they go (John 14), all the readings indicate that the mission of the church is always everywhere. Wherever we go, the Spirit has preceded us and goes with us. There is always something to proclaim, some way to

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 277.

articulate and live out the reality of the world being made new in God's kingdom whose king is the Risen One, Jesus Christ.

That it is indeed something worth proclaiming, articulating and living out, is due to the fact that Jesus Christ is the world's one and only true King, and God the Creator is the one true God. As Paul engages with the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics in Athens, and finds points in common with them (noting the altar "To an unknown god", and quoting from a couple of their number, Epimenides and Aratus, in v.28), he is not doing so in order to affirm the rightness of their views. The Epicureans held that the gods were remote, unconcerned, and uninvolved. The Stoics held that God was merely some inner divine essence within the world. Over against this, Paul emphatically proclaims a God worth knowing: the one God, Creator, who is, on the one hand, different from the world (*contra* the Stoics) and, on the other, compassionately involved in it (*contra* the Epicureans).

As I set out last week, there is a reason for the hope we have, and it is due entirely to the work of God in Christ Jesus setting the world to rights, getting it ready for a future we can participate in.

Well, I think it's time I got back to the first story.

*There is something odd about my balloon.*

*It doesn't matter how much you blow it up, it just goes on getting bigger ...*

*and bigger until ... [it pops from one's lips and whizzes around and around the room!]*

*You see it never ever bursts. Never ever.*

*I have squeezed it ... squashed it ... and whacked it with a stick.*

*I have kicked it ... run it over ... and stre-e-e-e-tched it!*

*And Kipper has attacked it.*

*But it is Indestructible.*

*I think that my balloon has Strange and Wonderful Powers!*

*The other day it disappeared completely ...*

*and when it came back it was square!*

*And this morning, while I was taking it for a walk ...*

*it decided to take me for a fly!*

*It took me up ... and up ... and up ... Oops! And finally ... down.*

*It was quite a trip, but we were back in time for tea.*

*So if you find a soggy old balloon. Whatever you do don't throw it away. Especially if it's a blue one.*

*You never know what it will do next.*

I chose this story because a balloon is inflated by invisible air or breath. Breath or wind is an image of the Holy Spirit. And this story speaks of mystery, and surprise, and amazing possibilities. That seems to me to be a pretty good description of what the gift of the Holy Spirit brings when we become followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is a bit mysterious, a bit difficult to explain. But the gift of the Holy Spirit brings us surprising and amazing possibilities because of God's power within us.

And that is a story to be continued. It is a story to be continued always and everywhere. It is a story to be continued in us and through us. It is a story to be proclaimed to the world.