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TO-ING AND FRO-ING

Andrew Neaum

*His final Homily as Rector of St Augustine's Shepparton,
the Sunday after Ascension.*

Coming and going, to-ing and fro-ing: a Rector coming, a Rector going, a Rector to-ing, a Rector fro-ing. When once it was said, "the king is dead", all would sing, "long live the king". If Neaum departs, then Potter starts.

Last Thursday was Ascension Day. Jesus' fro-ing, Jesus' going. Next Sunday is Pentecost, The Spirit's to-ing, the Spirit's coming.

The Gospel Readings have been anticipating this to-ing and fro-ing for the past several weeks, they have been all to do with Jesus' imminent departure, his going, and with the disciples' foreboding, sadness, worry and sorrow at that fro-ing, but also with Jesus' reassurance that his fro-ing would enable a significant to-ing, the coming of God the Holy Spirit. That he goes, only to come in a different way.

No man's land

And today, liturgically, is a sort of no man's land, twixt to and fro, a gap, a hiatus, an interstice between Easter and Pentecost. It used to be called "The Sunday after Ascension" It is called these days, "The 7th Sunday of Easter" but in a sense we don't know what to call it, or to do with it.

Do we blow out the big Easter Candle, as we used to, because the risen Easter Jesus, St Luke tells us, has ascended to heaven, left us, gone? Or does it remain alight because Easter's real end and fulfilment is not a fro-ing but to-ing, not a going but a coming, Pentecost, for in St John's Gospel, it is Jesus himself, before his Ascension, before his going, who breathes the Holy Spirit upon the Disciples in person. There's a to-ing before the fro-ing.

To blow out the big candle or not to blow out the big candle, that is the question. Both have scriptural validity.

To blow out or not to blow out

Liturgically speaking, not to blow is politically correct, for today, liturgists insist, is the Seventh Sunday of Easter, and Easter ends with Pentecost,

Pentecost, Pentecost, not Ascension, so the big Candle remains, to be quietly spirited, Holy Spirited away, just before next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday. Upon which day the Sanctuary will be red with fire, but not with the big Easter Candle's fiery flame.

I am nostalgic for the old way, though. In the good old days on Ascension Day, before Pentecost, after the Gospel reading, and with deep solemnity and in silence, we said goodbye to Easter by ceremoniously extinguishing the big Easter Candle. Suddenly the sanctuary was colder, darker, less friendly and reassuring.

Personal resonances

All of this resonates with me this year, especially, this to-ing and fro-ing. For obvious reasons. I too am froing, going, my light, such that it is, is to be extinguished.

Does this mean then that God's Spirit, God's fire, God's breath, insofar as it has been a part of me, is extinguished, that the parish, like the sanctuary once the Easter Candle is snuffed, will be a gloomier, darker, less Godly place?

Of course it doesn't, that's the whole point of the great Pentecost exchange. The great Pentecost shift from the particular to the general, from the local to the universal, from the temporal to the eternal, from the historical Jesus of Nazareth to the universal Christ and Holy Spirit, from only here from only there to every here and everywhere.

The torch's fire is passed on, is inextinguishable, uncrucifiable, Jesus is no longer focussed vulnerably into a particular time in a particular person, into a particular place, he is everywhere, accessible to all, in all.

During my time in this parish, and through my person and personality, he has been, I trust, enabled to manifest his reality and love, in ways that have helped and enlivened many.

In your new Rector it will be likewise, though differently, likewise but unlikewise, God's love will be enabled in Fr Des in ways that he was possibly inhibited in me, and your love which has so enriched my life and faith, will therefore be enabled to respond in new and different ways with him.

Far more can be mended than you know

Coming and going, to-ing and fro-ing a Rector coming, a Rector going, a Rector to-ing, a Rector fro-ing. When once it was said, "the king is dead", They

all would sing, “long live the king”. If Neaum departs, then Potter starts. The Pentecostal fire, the Pentecostal torch is passed on. A particular Candle is extinguished, but fire, is fire, is fire. I might go, must go, but anything of any worth, anything of love and God and truth and beauty in me, *that* doesn’t go, it remains, is everywhere, is of God.

So as the Easter Season draws to its close, remember back to Easter morning:

.....by the tomb sad, stricken Mary Magdalene is sitting outside in the sun. The insects have woken up, at the edge of the desert, a bee is nosing about in a lily a lily like silk, thinly tucked over itself, but much more perishable, that won’t last long.

Mary has had enough, there’s not even a body left to care for. He has gone, gone, gone. In misery she takes no notice of the feet that appear at the edge of her vision.....

“Don’t be afraid”, says Jesus. “Far more can be mended than you know”.

She is weeping.

The executed one, helps her to stand up.

*The italicised words at the end are an amplified quotation
from Francis Spufford’s superb book
“Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything,
Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense.”*

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