

THE UPPER ALDE BENEFICE

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

In Britain, the weather forecast is watched and listened to as avidly as is the news. Think how many times you hear, 'Lovely day isn't it?' or 'Shocking weather for the time of year,' or my favourite piece of nonsense, 'It's too cold to snow!' The vagaries of the British climate are a safe subject to discuss with anyone wherever you might encounter them. In one day we can experience all four seasons. Even though the proverb tells us that 'variety is the spice of life', most of us would opt for a more consistent pattern if we had the choice. We would like the security of being able to plan a picnic, a barbecue, a garden party or a cricket match without the fear of 'rain stopping play'.

The two types of weather that adults, and especially motorists, hate most are icy conditions and fog. Ice, and especially black ice, is treacherous and your feet or your car wheels can slip before you even realize that the ice is there. Newspapers report horrific stories of cars skidding into rivers and across roads into oncoming traffic. Even worse than ice and snow is fog. Fog is an insidious enemy, creeping up on familiar landmarks and obliterating them. People feel helpless in fog, As when they are blindfolded, they lose their sense of direction.

The big cities of the UK used to be noted for their 'pea-soupers' as they were often called. Smoke, that dangerous mixture of smoke from fossil fuels and fog, did untold damage to people's health. It could be fatal for those suffering with asthma or bronchitis to go out in foggy conditions. Fortunately, since legislation has been introduced and we are less reliant on coal, conditions are much improved.

I was brought up in the West Midlands, the Black Country as it is properly known, where it is said that even the sparrows have coughs. I remember one Saturday evening in the early 1960s, before the West Midlands adopted practices leading to cleaner air, my father suggested that he would take me to the Saturday church youth club. It was a bit misty when we started out on a journey of about one and a half miles. By the time we arrived at church the fog has descended with a vengeance and you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. There was no possibility that he could drop me off and drive home in safety. I had to walk home in front of the car and he followed me.

'Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards.'

So begins what many of us think is the greatest novel in the English language. Charles Dickens begins 'Bleak House' with a powerful and evocative description of fog. He is showing that while, outside, the London horse-drawn traffic is fog-bound, inside, the Victorian legal system is also hampered by fog – the fog of confusion and uncaring incompetence. Ignorance and confusion have the same effects on our mind as fog on our eyes.

The fog of superstition, ignorance, hatred and fear can be dispelled. In this Sunday's gospel reading our Lord promises his disciples, and that promise comes to us as well, that he will send his Spirit to us.

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth.'

Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

God our redeemer, you have delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of your Son: grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life, so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

