5th Sunday of Eastertide (A) 3rd May 2026

‘A Tale of 2 Philips’

Acts 6: election of 7 deacons. Ps 32: *may Your merciful love be upon us!*
1Pt 2: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.*
Jn 14: 1–12: *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*

For most of the Church’s year, the 1st Reading on Sundays (from the Old Testament) and the Gospel Reading, are chosen to mutually illuminate the other. Whilst the Gospel readings go in sequence from Sunday to Sunday (e.g. in Year ‘A’ from chapter to chapter of St Matthew), the OT 1st readings jump around to shed light on that day’s Gospel reading, and show its fulfilment in the Gospel. … But that’s not the case in Eastertide! Instead in this season we get a sequence in the 1st Readings from the *Acts of the Apostles* (NT) telling of the apostles’ spreading the Good News beginning from Jerusalem, and a series of Johannine Gospel passages — in these latter Sundays of the season, mostly from the long and beautiful chapters 13–17 which St John sets at the Last Supper. There’s no deliberate linking of these two readings at this time of year. … But, at first sight it looks like there might be a link after all! If you spotted it, *Philip* gets a look in, today, in both readings! Naturally, I notice this! Unfortunately, this is a ‘red herring’: these are two completely different Philips!

Acts 6 speaks of the choosing of the 1st seven deacons — an order of priestly ministry determined on by the early Church for the charitable assistance to needy members of the community: deacon Philip is one of them, along with deacon Stephen. Quite quickly their diaconal ministry expands into preaching! St Stephen goes on in ch. 7 to give a rousing public testimony to the Risen Jesus, and suffers martyrdom almost immediately outside the Jerusalem city walls with the approval of St Paul (who is yet to see the light). And in ch. 8 deacon Philip travels away from Jerusalem, north, to Samaria, preaching to the non-Jews in that territory, and making many new converts. It’s an important reminder that *diaconal ministry* has been an integral part of the Church’s holy orders since the very beginning, and still provides such support today to the work of parishes, priests and bishops in our dioceses. Indeed, I have known students here with relatives (fathers, uncles) who are ordained permanent deacons. The

Permanent Diaconate is a vocation lived in tandem with family life and career: typically permanent deacons are just a bit older when they enter training (40s, 50s), and are established in their jobs and often are also married with children. Our parishes in this diocese are blessed with an increasing number of devoted deacons who serve their people alongside work and family. They cannot replace in any way the crucial role of priests, and rarely would they later go on to be ordained priests, but in their own specific ministry they support and sustain the Church's life at the grass-roots level. One of the many hats I wear apart from my 'Newman House' Chaplain hat, is to help teach those in formation for the Permanent Diaconate, at seminary in Birmingham: it's a joy to meet them and see their deep desire to serve the Church alongside their lives' other commitments.

What of Philip in the Gospel today? This is another Philip entirely. It was a Greek name in common usage at the time of Jesus — there was plenty of Greek influence in the Holy Land then; in fact, it was the *lingua franca* of the time; that's why the NT is written entirely in Greek and not in Hebrew like most of the OT. Philip in the Gospel, at the Last Supper, of course, is Philip the Apostle, one of the Twelve. (It's his feast-day today!) Philip the Apostle earns that stinging rebuke from Jesus in the heart of the Gospel today, "*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know Me, Philip?*" You will understand that I always hear that line from Jesus with a certain humility. (If your name also is a name used in the Gospel text, perhaps you are also caught from time to time as if it addresses you personally … Peter, … Mary, … Matthew, … Joseph, … Martha, … Thomas …). "*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know Me, Philip?*" — it's a good question! However well we think we know Jesus, have we endeavoured to know Him more, to deepen our knowledge and understanding of Him? The apostles had had that three years' training with Him, and here they are — facing their final exams at the Last Supper — and still they do not understand all they had been taught. Luckily they face a lenient, and divinely patient Master, who continues to

instruct them, right up to the wire. The whole passage today (ch. 14) is full of choice nuggets of Our Lord's inspirational teaching. Let's hear a few:

— "*Let not your hearts be troubled …*"

— "*I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also*."

— "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*."

— "*Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father … I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me*."

In the way St John recounts these discourses of Jesus, the richness of this divine wisdom is palpable: the apostles hanging on His every word, unaware that this indeed was the very last night, and that He would be taken from them on the morrow. And yet these words of His in Jn 14 point inexorably towards the future, a new future, *a new type of future*! St Philip and the others struggle with the newness of all that Our Lord has come to bring — 3 yrs in, and now the very last night, and they're still struggling. But with the newness, comes also the reassurance, "*Believe in God; believe also in Me … I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*." As always, they can trust in Him, even as they try to get their heads round the extraordinary statements of the Son of God on earth. It reminds me of another classic line in St John's Gospel — perhaps my favourite, as it expresses so succinctly the reason the apostles had faith in Christ, and therefore why we can, too: in Jn 6, St Peter speaks on behalf of them all when Jesus teaches them of His self-gift and real presence in the Holy Eucharist: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God*" (Jn 6: 68–69). They trust Him not because everything He says is self-evident, but precisely because although it is not, they know full well that His origin is divine, and that therefore all He says is, and must be, 100% true. As we hear and digest these lines of Jesus's teaching, let's allow their truthfulness to settle deep into our psyche. Let's picture ourselves at the feet of Jesus, reclining with Him in that Upper Room: the time is short; the revision session is urgent; our needing to

believe and understand … well, it's almost our last chance! But He's there still, speaking "*the words of eternal life*" for us, even though it's late now, and the day is far gone, the night is at hand. Still He speaks, He explains, He leaves sayings to ponder and to savour. Which of these life-giving phrases are you taking to heart and taking home today? — which of these divine sayings are you going to commit to memory and hold as a prayer within your soul, for when you are in moments of doubt or moments of despair?

— "*Let not your hearts be troubled …*"

— "*I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also*."

— "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*."

— "*Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father … I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me*."

… or maybe it's another of the lines of Jn 14 — you decide: take the text away today with you, and re-read it later this week. At a time of exams, assignments and stress this is not the time to neglect your prayer and your Scripture reading; you might need to ration it a bit, but don't neglect it; no, your soul needs feeding still, too, even as you cram the intellect with the facts and figures that your worldly examiners expect of you. Make sure that you still remember what your *divine examiner* is wanting you to have mastered, patient and merciful though He is. Do go back to this Jn 14 passage again this week, for *Jesus wishes to speak to you every week of your life*, comforting you, even in these weeks that are university exam weeks.

The last thing we would want, at the end of life, is to hear Jesus say to us, "*Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know Me*," … Philip … Peter, Mary, Matthew, Joseph, Martha, Thomas … [insert your name]? Let us be diligent students of Jesus whilst we are diligent students of our degree studies. Let us be *even more diligent* students of Jesus than we are diligent students of our degree studies, and whilst our stay on earth lasts. Ultimately His reward is the greater, the more perfect, laurel wreath: *the crown of righteousness* laid up for us.