

## 20140525SixthSundayOfEasterSermon

A common theme I'm sure you've noticed through the Easter Season is Jesus telling us through the gospels readings that he will be leaving and returning to the Father. Yet, at the same time, he is still with us but in a different way from before his death on the cross. And today's readings tell us that it is through the Spirit of the Father and the Son that this presence is experienced by us. Through the Holy Spirit...

When we think about this, it leads us into the liturgical themes of this part of Eastertide. The excitement of discovering that Jesus is alive has been replaced with the preparations for ascension – Jesus going to the Father which we will celebrate on Thursday. I hope, by having a lunch time service, many others who find 7am too early will be able to come and celebrate this major church festival.

Post-Ascension we might think we are now minus Jesus. Yet, not really because we have the Holy Spirit sent to us 50 days after Easter and ten after the Ascension, on Pentecost Sunday. And today's Gospel foretells this. Then as I said we experience through the presence of the Holy Spirit, both the Father and the Son – in fact the entire Trinity whose feast day we commemorate a week after Pentecost. The people who drew up the Church's Liturgical Year and readings knew what they were doing to help us to come to an understanding of our faith.

Last week I said that our Gospel from both last week's and this week's came from Jesus' farewell or Final discourse to his disciples. I said it was like a Last Will and Testament. If you remember last week he reminded them he had to return to the Father. Today, in the gospel Jesus is telling his disciples that, through the Spirit, he will continue to be with them – and us – forever.

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit different names. Today he calls the Spirit an 'Advocate'. In other biblical translations he is called a 'Counsellor', 'Comforter', Helper, Intercessor, Strengthened. The Greek word used is *parakletos* (παράκλητος), from which comes the older word English word 'Paraclete'. I am glad we don't use it much any more because I always want to say parakeet rather than parakleet!

Basically a 'paraclete' is someone like a defence lawyer, someone who stands by you in court, gives you support, advice and comfort in difficult situations where you need help. That is precisely the role of the Spirit in our Christian life. He teaches, he guides, he supports, he consoles, he comforts as we try to be faithful in our following of Christ's Way.

He, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, the same Truth that Jesus himself represents. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." What that says to me is that we spend too much time trying to differentiate the role of the Father, the Son and the Spirit yet here we can see the sameness and yet also the difference between the Son and the Spirit. And Jesus has already told us that he and the Father are one. So my logic tells me that this proves the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one, co-equal and co-eternal – but wait for Trinity Sunday for more on that!

Do you remember when Jesus was on trial, he was asked by Pilate "What is truth?" Well, I can tell you that Truth is not just a list of dogmas or doctrines whether they prove the Trinity or not. Truth represents a deep understanding of what life is really about, of how it is to be lived in partnership with one's sisters and brothers in our common search to make this world truly God's Kingdom, to make this world the kind of place that God wants it to be. It combines the ideas of wholeness and integrity, a total harmony between our inner spiritual selves and the outer self that other see of us as well as the harmony between the self and God. The best example of this we see to the highest degree in Jesus because only he is the completely whole and integrated man.

Many in the world do not recognise the Spirit. The 'world' here represents all those who live only for themselves, who see everyone else and everything else as stepping stones to their own advancement, their own pleasure and enjoyment. Such people are totally deaf to the Spirit.

We, however, who have been baptised and who accepted Christ and his Gospel, do know the Spirit. "He abides with you, and he will be in you." So, although Jesus tells his disciples that he is about to leave them and they are clearly alarmed and despondent at the idea, he reassures them that he will come back, he will continue to be with them but in a different way.

It is an end but also a beginning. To the 'world' Jesus' death on the Cross was the end of everything. He had been a flash in the pan; a sensation of sorts in that corner of the world. Jesus Christ the Superstar. Now, as Jesus speaks with his disciples at the Last Supper, it was all about to end in total failure and degradation. But those who can see, discern in the cross not dismal failure but the triumph of love over hate, they can see that the object of that love is themselves, they know that Jesus has passed into life and that all those who identify themselves totally with him and his vision of universal Love still enjoy his presence.

"On that day", the day when Jesus was lifted up in glory on the cross, "you will understand that I am in the Father and you in me and I in you!" And how is that to be brought about? "If you love me you will keep my commandments." And what are those commandments? Quite simply it is to put Love at the heart of all living. "The greatest love a person can show is to give their life for their friends," Jesus says to his disciples in the next chapter of John. Giving up his life for the disciples is what Jesus did for them and for us and here comes the crunch, it is what we are called on to do for others. Jesus said: "By this will all know that you are my followers, that you have love for each other."

And what is that Love? This Love is an unconditional desire for the well-being of every single person. Another word for 'love' in the Gospel is 'service'. Not the service of the slave for a master, not the service of the specialist – be he/she doctor, lawyer, priest – for the (inferior) lay person but the service of one brother or sister to another brother or sister without any distinction of rank, race, nationality, religion or whatever.

It is all summed up in the final sentence of the Gospel Reading :<sup>21</sup>*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.* We love God not just by expressing our love directly for him but by the way in which we extend Love to all those around us without any exceptions whatever. And all those who love Jesus will receive the love of the Father.

But how do we love this Jesus who is no longer with us? We love Jesus when we love him in our brothers and sisters. *"Whatever you do to these the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me,"* he said. When we live our lives in this way we will in turn experience God's love and grow in our familiarity with God.

The lesson for our own Christian lives is so clear. To be a disciple of Christ is to be not only a disciple, a follower but also an apostle, sharing our experience of knowing Christ with others. As Paul did in Athens in our first reading. He knew that he might be mocked or even attacked as he had been in other towns and cities on his missionary journeys. But he did it any way. Why? Because he wanted others to experience the love of God that he had experienced.

When we show God's love in our hearts and our lives towards our sisters and brothers we might experience attacks. In our second reading Peters says: *Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?* <sup>14</sup>*But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,* <sup>15</sup>*but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.*

Now, if called upon to share our faith we must first know our faith. We must be always ready **and able** to give people an adequate explanation of what we believe. Our faith is not just something we hold because we were told to do so by a priest from the pulpit or because we read about it in a book. It may have begun that way but now it is something based on an inner conviction arising from our personal experience. Paul saw the shrine to the unknown God but from what he tells those Athenians it is obvious that he knows in his heart in whom he believes. And that inner conviction must flow out into our behaviour – our words, our actions, the way we relate with other people whoever they may be.

But our sharing of faith is not always welcomed. Peter tells us: *Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you;* <sup>16</sup>*yet do it with gentleness and reverence.* It is a paradox that, like Jesus himself, our very goodness may be the reason we are attacked. But we need also to be sure that we have not given genuine cause for criticism, that we do not proclaim one thing and do something else. And Peter adds, *"If it is the will of God that you should suffer, it is better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong."* Remember that Beatitude from our Lord which describes as happy and fortunate those who are privileged to be maligned and persecuted for their faithfulness to truth and love and justice.

So today let us rejoice in the gift of the Spirit by which the Father and Jesus God's Word continues to be with us and in us and to guide us in the Way which he guarantees our true happiness and fulfilment. How do we know that is

true? We just have to remember his invitation as he called his first disciples: *'Come and see.'* Many have done so and not been disappointed.