

Sixth Sunday of Easter (17 May 2020)

Lectionary Reading: John 14:15-21



Today's Gospel reading from John is a continuation of Jesus' Farewell Discourse, which we explored in part in the sermon last week. This is indeed a very long good-bye—5 chapters in all!

In biblical times, these sorts of formal final farewell speeches were traditional, offering not just flowery rhetoric, but real words of comfort and instructions to the survivors of a departing leader or teacher. And so here we find Jesus, with great sensitivity, both reassuring and directing his disciples about how to carry on after his death.

The problem though, is that the longer he talks, the more confused and anxious they seem to become. And why shouldn't they? They had left their old lives behind to follow Jesus, and now he was going to leave them? They'd taken extraordinary risks in his company, openly breaking the Jewish law and offending religious officials in the process. He had taught them, walked with them, blessed and broken bread with them.

Yes, of course they had become very fond of him, he was after all their friend, but they'd also come to rely very heavily upon him... and even to recognize him as the Messiah... And now he was telling them that he was going away for a reunion with his Father. Not only were they not invited, but he was leaving them in charge. Perhaps we can take a moment to think about how they might have felt... little wonder they were beginning to feel abandoned, like orphans. Reality—and as the counsellor in me would say, separation anxiety—were setting in...

However, they would not be left alone to fend for themselves. No, part of the good news of Jesus' departure was that it would make way for the arrival of another, the Advocate, the 'spirit of truth' who would be with them always.

John describes the Holy Spirit for the first time here in this passage using the Greek word *parakletos*. We often see it translated as "Paraclete" because it is a word so rich with meaning. Its roots mean "called alongside," and it can signify a variety of roles: Comforter, Encourager, Exhorter, Helper, Appealer, Advocate. John seems to draw upon all of these meanings to address the variety of ways in which the Holy Spirit will engage with Jesus' disciples.

According to John, the Holy Spirit comes to abide with us and to speak on Jesus' behalf; to teach and remind us of all that Jesus has said to us, to reveal truth and testify on Jesus' behalf, to keep alive all that Jesus said and did. Quite the job description you could say!

And yet I think it's fair to say that as a church we tend not to focus overly much on the Holy Spirit. Just the other day I saw a comment saying how difficult social distancing will be in church on Pentecost Sunday with all the charismatics jumping around and breaking all the rules! I would suggest that the realm of the Holy Spirit may extend far beyond such narrow, stereotyped images. The Holy Spirit works not only in ways that are loud or boisterous or extraverted. In II Kings we encounter the Spirit as "a still small voice," and in Romans 8 the apostle Paul tells us, "that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

As part of completing my theology degree, (only one unit left!) I'm currently in the throes of writing my final essay for the unit on Medieval Church History. In this particular essay the focus is on comparing and contrasting the religious orders founded by Francis of Assisi (Franciscans), and Dominic de Guzmán (Dominicans) in the thirteenth century.

I must admit as the unit progressed I felt increasingly discouraged as I read what appeared to be accounts of political manoeuvring and alliances on the part of the Church as it sought to grow in power and status. Often I would find myself wondering or thinking 'where is God in all of this'? Then I encountered Francis and Dominic and I realised that God was truly present and alive and active.

Like many holy people of God before them they were able to discern "the signs of the times." Their love of Jesus Christ, and their desire for proclaiming the truth of the Gospel and living an authentic Christian life, was in sharp contrast to the reality of the rich and beautiful Empirical Church which had developed with the flourishing of monasticism in the preceding centuries. A Church that had become increasingly irrelevant and ineffective for the many.

In the development of their perspective Orders, both Francis and Dominic saw their calling as one of imitating the life of Jesus, a life of love fulfilled in keeping his commandments to love our neighbour as ourselves, to love our enemies, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Scholars, however, have long highlighted the striking differences in their personalities - Francis' charismatic spirit and enigmatic personality with that of Dominic, who is characterised as conservative, scholarly and even somewhat dull. And yet, both were prompted by and responded to the presence of God with them, the 'Spirit of truth,' in their own particular way. A way that still reminds the church even a week of centuries later, that at every level the source of all life and hope is to be found only in Jesus Christ the Lord. Fear not then, the Holy Spirit is at work in both the extrovert and the introvert!

For the disciples, it matters to hear that the God they know, the one standing before them, will not abandon them. God's work and presence in the world will continue, as it has always

done. The disciples are not alone. And Jesus sets that same promise before us today - his promise is still real and he remains ever faithful. The question though is whether Jesus, for us, is a past memory or a present ongoing reality, a sentimental story that makes us feel good or a living experience that challenges, guides, nurtures and transforms our life and the lives of others.

According to Jesus the answer to this question is determined by the love that is shown and fulfilled in keeping his commandments. The commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves, to love our enemies, to love our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Whose feet do we wash and whose feet do we ignore? What are the boundaries of love? Do we keep the commandments? Is our love growing, expanding, transformative of ourselves and the world? A call that can be, and often is challenging.

Our love for God is what motivates us to keep the commandments that God has given, and likewise when we are at our best in keeping these commandments, we are able to most fully experience God's love, a love that originates in his abiding love and presence within us. The connecting point between the two is the Holy Spirit, which stirs in our hearts a love for God and encourages us to be the faithful disciples God calls each of us to be.

Perhaps we don't often think about it or realise that in this way we too are Christ-bearers. The Spirit helps us to be Christ for one another. In listening to another, in care of all sorts, in putting ourselves out for the other, in working for justice and for peace the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth is alive and active and people are touched by God's love.

I will not leave you orphaned, says Jesus. You think I'll be gone for good, but guess what? You will see me. You **will** see me. I will have a continuous presence with you. If you love me, if you take me seriously; if you do the work of love wherever you can; I will be with you. And he is. And he will continue to be so - through the Spirit and the love and the truth we embody-- love for God and love for one another. Amen.