

St Francis & St Mary's Holy Communion 21st May 2017

6th Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

‘Alleluia, Christ is risen; he is risen indeed! so what?’ we’re now on our 6th Sunday of the Easter season, still in white, still lighting the Paschal candle; perhaps we’re wondering where this is all going, if anywhere

in that case we are probably in sympathy with the first disciples as they hang about after the resurrection, wondering what will happen next; we’re told in Acts 1 that the risen Jesus appeared to them, on and off, over a period of 40 days before leaving them at the Ascension; and for us that 40 days is up this Thursday

so the words of Jesus that we read from John 14 today fit this moment well; in John’s gospel they are placed at the Last Supper, just before Jesus’ crucifixion; but they are equally words that could have been spoken in preparation for his second departure, i.e. the Ascension

if Jesus is finally leaving his disciples, they must be in a bit of a panic, wondering how they will cope; they need reassurance and guidance for a future without their master, teacher, and friend

we’ve all experienced bereavement or loss of some kind, but it’s particularly difficult to say ‘goodbye’ to someone on whom we’ve come to rely; how can we cope without them as a reference point in our lives? our whole existence has to take on a new and unfamiliar shape when I talk to relatives in preparing for a funeral, I notice this especially for those who’ve been close to a parent who has just died; that relationship may not always have been an easy one, but they’ve been used all their lives to talking things over with this one person, and now that fixed point has been taken away, and they feel bereft, abandoned, disorientated – perhaps we’ve felt the same at times?

surely Jesus’ friends and disciples feel that way too, as they contemplate life without his fatherly wisdom and guidance?

notice how Jesus uses the language of parenting as he reassures them here: ‘I will not leave you orphaned’, he says, ‘I am coming to you’

we’re reading through these chapters of John in our Tuesday afternoon Bible study group, and we all agreed that we found these words very comforting: ‘I will not leave you orphaned’

but what do they mean? how will Jesus ‘come to them’? Jesus explains it like this: ‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another Advocate*, to be with you forever ... the Spirit of truth’

who is this Advocate, this Spirit of truth? what will he do?

the Greek word translated ‘advocate’ here, ‘*parakletos*’, is not easy to pin down; other translations offer ‘counsellor’, ‘comforter’, ‘paraclete’! the word carries the sense of someone called to stand alongside us, either to argue our case in court – like an advocate – or to guide us in our decisions – like a counsellor

what we might miss, in wondering just what this word means, is the clue just before it – this is *another* Advocate / Counsellor / Comforter

now there are two words in Greek for ‘other’; one means ‘other and different’, one means ‘other and the same’; e.g. I don’t like this sweater, I’ll wear another one – a different one; or, I love these biscuits, I’ll have another one – the same again, please

here in John 14 the meaning is ‘*another* Advocate, *the same as* the first one’; who is that? who is the first Advocate? Jesus, of course! the answer’s always Jesus!

so if you want to know what this ‘other advocate’ does, look at what Jesus did with his disciples all that time he was with them: he loved them, taught them, challenged them, forgave them, he walked alongside them, guided them, gave them authority to teach and to heal

this ‘other’ Advocate will do the same for them, when Jesus has gone; and he will do the same for us too; so when we talk, as we do at Pentecost, of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, coming to us and filling us, we are not talking about anything strange or cultish – this is just Jesus in another guise!

for example, Jesus says earlier in this chapter – verses that we read last week – ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’; we can see that this Holy Spirit, this replacement Jesus, is just the same:

he too is the Way: as our advocate and counsellor, he guides us in the *way of Jesus*

he too is the Truth: Jesus calls him ‘the Spirit of truth’ and later in John we read that he ‘will teach you all things’ and ‘will lead you into all the truth’; he reveals the *truth of Jesus*

he too is the Life: Jesus says, ‘because I live, you also will live; on that day [when you receive the Spirit] you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you’; he invites us to share in the life of the Trinity, and so he imparts the *life of Jesus*

we are getting ready to celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit; I have started early on this, because we don’t want it to be just a brief nod in the direction of the Spirit, a quick dip of the toe into the water, before we put that idea away again for another year! we want to take time to understand and absorb its meaning; and the key point for today is this:

when we engage with the Holy Spirit, this is *Just Jesus!* and if we trust Jesus, and think he is a good thing, and wish we could connect better with a man who lived 2000 years ago, that we can never meet in the flesh, this is our answer, just as it was for those first disciples – we need the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of Jesus!

he is the one whose presence we long for, right here, in us, with us, around us; inspiring, strengthening, challenging, equipping, encouraging – not just for our own ease and comfort, but to do the ‘works of Jesus’ that we heard about last week, John 14:12-14 ...

we see the Holy Spirit’s impact in our other readings: in Acts 17, he is at work in Paul, as he confronts the pagan worship and intellectual debates of Athens, and finds a way of presenting Jesus that will connect with them; Wayne Dixon was talking last week about ‘making Jesus known’; how do we make Jesus known in our own time and place? by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and guide us

in 1 Peter 3, the Holy Spirit is at work in those facing persecution for their faith, relieving their fears, giving them hope in their suffering, and enabling them to ‘make their defence to anyone who demands an account for the hope that is in them’

that's a verse I referred to a couple of weeks ago, in thinking about how we can share our faith with others; if that is something we're struggling with, we need the Holy Spirit!

this week we begin a period of special prayer, 'Thy Kingdom Come' (see fliers), that runs from Ascension on Thursday through to Pentecost on 4th June; I'll read to you a quote from Archbishop Justin Welby about this:

'after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples went to Jerusalem and prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit; the vision behind *Thy Kingdom Come* is to do just what those first Christians did – to pray in faith that the Holy Spirit would come and lead the way it witness and evangelism'

'our prayer, "come, Holy Spirit" at Pentecost doesn't just stop with ourselves; we pray this so that we can be empowered for witness; Martin Luther gave us a definition of sin as *the heart curved in on itself*; you can apply that to the church – it can curve in on itself; the Spirit comes to un-self us, to turn us inside out'

when we pray 'thy kingdom come' in the Lord's Prayer, we need to ask, 'how can I be the answer to this prayer? how can I bring God's kingdom closer? how can I make Jesus known?'; of course, we feel completely inadequate to the task, and that should make us pray all the more fervently, 'come, Holy Spirit', for it is only by his presence and power within us, the presence and power of Jesus himself, that we have any hope of making any sort of difference

so do join in this special time of prayer; if you can't physically attend, at least you can pray wherever you are; we end with the special *Thy Kingdom Come* prayer:

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world to preach the good news of your kingdom: inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love, that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.