



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Sixth Sunday of Easter

### Year A

**John 14.15-21**

**Acts 17.22-31**

In last week's gospel reading Jesus began his 'farewell discourse' to the disciples at his Last Supper with them. His speech is packed full of dense theology. They will need to understand it if they are to pass on the truth to others. Jesus makes it clear that he will be leaving them, his crucifixion and death is imminent though, as yet, they have no idea of this. Jesus understands quite clearly what is to happen; he understands the effect his death will have on his followers and what their feeling of desolation will be. He knows that they will be facing dark times and years of struggle. Jesus has said those wonderful words that he is in the Father and the Father in him. Now in our reading Jesus makes a promise to his disciples. He will ask his Father to send the Holy Spirit,

<sup>16</sup> 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him' Here the truth of the trinity is stated, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three in one. Wow, they must have been amazed. Tragically, in general, those he came to save have rejected Jesus but this small loyal band have believed; because of this they must not worry. Jesus gives them a promise, I will never leave you. The Holy Spirit of God will live in you.

'You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'

Jesus will breathe on them and they will receive the Holy Spirit on the evening of the resurrection. The Holy Spirit will descend on his followers at Pentecost and transform them. Jesus is going to his Father but he will be with them, and us, in the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful promise.

<sup>18</sup> 'I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you,' in other words, we will meet again. In Matthew's gospel at his ascension Jesus puts it like this,

<sup>20</sup> 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28)

Life for the disciples after his departure will not be the same again; Jesus will not be with them physically anymore, they will no longer be able to rely on his leadership. However, and this is the

important point, they will never be alone. The Spirit of truth is nothing less than God's Holy Spirit indwelling within them, strengthening them and guiding them.

Here we have a clear reference to the Trinity; Jesus the Son will ask God the Father to send the Holy Spirit to them. This is the wonderful promise, they will never be, 'orphaned,' they will never walk alone. Their lives might be tough from now on but the Spirit of God will be within them to strengthen and uphold them and most importantly to enlighten them...

<sup>19</sup> 'In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.'

At his crucifixion Jesus will be killed, brutally executed by those he came to save. But that is not the end because at his resurrection he will be with his followers. And then the wonderful promise, all who believe in me will have eternal life with me. There will be no separation. Jesus is part of his Father and because we believe in him we are united to him and his Father through the Holy Spirit. 'Because I live you also will live.' This is the crux of our faith. The resurrection vanquishes death forever. Jesus won eternal life for us. We will be united with him after death and we will be citizens of God's newly created order when Jesus will return to judge his earth.

<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.'

Love is the centre of Christianity, or it should be. It is Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Where there is no love there is no Christianity. Jesus loved humanity so much he gave his life for us. Our God hung on the cross for us, but by doing so he lifted us to the Father. He made the last covenant sealed in his blood. He made the promise of love but a covenant is two sided; we have to keep promises too. We need to love God and one another as Jesus loved us and to do our best in our lives to live as he taught us to.

With the Holy Spirit to strengthen and sustain us we can do more than in our own strength. We see how, strengthened by the Spirit working within them, Jesus' followers carry his message of transforming love into the world. By his death and resurrection Jesus wins salvation for all who believe and trust in him, 'Because I live you also will live.' Jesus makes it quite clear that there is an indissoluble bond between himself and God and humanity. The immanence of God is stated when he says,

'I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.'

God the Holy Trinity dwells within each one of us in a real relationship of love. This bond and relationship depends on our faith in him and keeping his commandments. 'Those who love me will be loved by my Father.' Jesus gives this threefold commandment to the disciples and to us; love God, love me and act out my works by loving one another as I have loved you. Jesus is present with us now and always. God is there walking alongside us in joy and in sorrow. It is always good to remember the words in our communion service, 'The Lord is here, his Spirit is with us.'

The Holy Spirit working within them means that the followers of Jesus can do wonderful things in his name. The Spirit enables them to see clearly and to understand his message, his death and resurrection as they never could before. They, through its enlightenment, can pass on the gospel to others so the church can grow as Jesus intended. They are his hands and feet on earth now.

Our reading from Acts has moved on now to chapter 17. Last week's reading from chapter 7 dealt with the death of the deacon Stephen, the first Christian martyr in around AD 36. In three short years after Jesus spoke to his disciples (in the passage above) they were able to inspire others, as he

said they would, and to spread the wonderful truth of Jesus. We are told that Stephen was 'full of the Holy Spirit.' The Holy Spirit was among the believers and they were doing wonders in God's name as Jesus said they would. We are told that those who were stoning Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Well Saul, now Paul, has received his epiphany moment on the Damascus Road. He has turned from persecutor in chief to missionary and evangelist. He is full of the Holy Spirit and lives his life for Jesus, his Lord and God.

We see Paul now in Athens, but prior to this he has been in Thessalonica preaching in the synagogue.

<sup>1</sup> 'After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, <sup>3</sup> explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.' (Acts 17)

Paul's words had great effect and many believed. The Jews, who were enraged, got a mob together to seize Paul; however he escaped and the believers hurried him to safety, to Beroea. There he went straight to the synagogue to teach the message of Jesus, and the people were receptive. All should have been well but the Jews from Thessalonica followed and once more he was in danger. Then Paul travelled to Athens, the very nerve centre and capital of Greece.

Here he is at the hub of religions, philosophies and beliefs. The city is full of shrines and idols and Paul is horrified. His one aim is to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen. How to do it in a place that is pagan? He simply goes to the synagogue and to the marketplace, wherever he can find an audience, and witnesses to Jesus. Debating was almost a national sport in Athens and Luke mentions Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who debated with him.

<sup>18</sup> 'Some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

<sup>19</sup> So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' (Acts 17)

All this sounds very polite but actually it is quite threatening, you must not challenge the accepted order otherwise you could be in grave danger. So they took him to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the highest court in the city, set on a rock from which you would look down on the market place and across to the Acropolis. Paul had better get it right now or he was in grave danger. Was this man out of his mind or was he challenging the status quo and all they held dear?

What Paul did was wonderful. He met people where they were, he didn't begin by challenging anything. He began by praising them,

<sup>22</sup> 'Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.'

That in itself is true but the type of worship in Athens was often allied to immorality and was of course anathema to Paul. Nevertheless, mission does not seek to antagonise. Paul starts from where they are and seeks to enlighten them.

<sup>23</sup> 'For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'

Paul is so clever here. The 'Unknown God' he adopts as the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now he can freely preach the good news of Jesus. But this is the one true God, so different from anything they have known,

<sup>24</sup> 'The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.'

Paul is not afraid to challenge now and he condemns the practices that they are used to. God is creator of everything that is and will be, he gives life to all and does not live in shrines because he is omniscient and omnipresent, he is the creator and sustainer of all. No one can capture God; he is bigger than we can even conceive. No, now Paul speaks out. He speaks against idols, pagan temples and all the rest of it. No this is not the way: God is the ruler of humanity we must not seek to capture him.

<sup>26</sup> 'From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

The Father of humankind, Abraham became the father of all nations. God is actually within us in his Holy Spirit, creator of all that is yet close as our own breathing. Now Paul gets to the crux of the matter,

<sup>29</sup> 'Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

In these few sentences Paul is giving the Christian theology. No way must you have shines to try to capture God. God creates us, we do not create him! God has called humanity to him through the Jewish religion. Jesus Christ is the culmination of that. Turn from these idols and hear of the one true God. Jesus Christ died and was raised and he will come again to judge the earth on the last day in God's new creation. Because Jesus was raised all believers will be raised with him.

Here is where our reading ends but it is followed by these verses,

<sup>32</sup> 'When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.' It is hard to imagine Paul stopping at this point. But it is the resurrection which intrigues those who listen to him and indeed follow him.

Jesus' promise to the disciples in our gospel reading is that the Holy Spirit will come to them. Here we see Paul full of the Holy Spirit standing, as it were, in the lion's den and speaking fearlessly for Christ.

His Holy Spirit is with us now and for always, that is Jesus' promise to us.

Last week at his coronation King Charles was anointed with holy oil and the Archbishop called down the Holy Spirit upon him. It was the most sacred part of the ceremony and was hidden from us. The choir sang Handel's 'Zadok the priest', but they also sang another hymn which I will use at the end as my quotation.

*'Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire.'* John Cosin

