



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Sixth Sunday of Easter Year C 2022

**Acts 16.9-15**

**John 14.23-29**

To really understand our gospel reading we have to go back to the gospel reading from last week and then we need to put it into context. Judas had just gone out into the night to set the wheels of Jesus' arrest in motion. Now Jesus begins his 'farewell discourse' which continues until his prayer in chapter seventeen. I think it is a shame that a section has been missed. Our gospel reading last week ended at chapter 13.35. and today's begins at 14.23. It is a large portion to omit especially when it contains so much wonderful teaching. It really is worth reading the passage before our gospel for today.

After giving his great commandment to 'Love one another just as I have loved you,' Jesus explains that he must leave the disciples. Peter swears he will follow Jesus to death. Jesus knows how Peter will fail and tells him so but his words which follow are wonderful.

<sup>14.1</sup> 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.'

This, together with the great commandment should be a Christian's guide for life. There follows the famous passage often read at funeral services.

<sup>2</sup> 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'

It is worth pausing here, we look back at these events with the advantage of hindsight. We know what will happen, we know of the glory of the resurrection and of Pentecost. We have the New Testament scriptures and two thousand years of theology. These eleven disciples had none of that. They had followed Jesus through his three years of ministry but it is obvious from the things they say that their understanding was somewhat hazy. Who can blame them! It is useful to try to put ourselves into their shoes for a bit. Sit in imagination in that room, watch the flames from the tiny lamps cast their shadows and listen to Jesus' words. This 'farewell discourse' is pretty dense theological teaching for these poor men but Jesus has to show them who he is, he has to work to

prepare them for what is to come in the few short hours that are left to him. St. John is able to condense huge amounts of theology into a few sentences, we see that in the opening of his gospel and I will refer to that later.

<sup>10</sup> 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me,'

Jesus is saying quite clearly that he is part of the Godhead. What he says to them is the word of God. They are the ones who will be responsible for taking the word of God out into the world when he leaves them. But how are they to accomplish a task like that? What on earth can eleven simple men do to continue Jesus' work? On their own it is an impossible task but they will not be alone! Jesus tells them that it will happen. They will perform signs as he has done.

<sup>12</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Indeed they will but not perform tasks in their own strength. They simply have no ability. Even after the resurrection appearances in the upper room they are still bereft of any idea. Peter's 'I'm going fishing,' sums it up and significantly even when they do fish they labour in vain all night and catch nothing. Jesus knows that in their own strength they are not equal to the task. No, something wonderful is about to happen. This is the promise of Jesus. The disciples could have had no conception of what he meant then, but they would understand at Pentecost.

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

This then is the great promise, the sending of the Holy Spirit. In these passages St, John is clearly telling of Jesus' teaching of the Trinity. I am in the Father and the Father is in me and I will send the advocate the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Holy Spirit means that the Spirit of God is within each one of them, strengthening them and opening their minds to the teaching of Jesus. After Pentecost we see people whose lives have been turned around by God's Spirit. They could never have comprehended the words of Jesus fully without the indwelling of that Spirit to give them understanding and the power to impart it to others.

It is now that our reading begins and it is impossible to look at it properly without understanding what has gone before. Jesus has made one thing very clear,

<sup>17</sup> 'This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'

So what the world cannot accept, he, Jesus will reveal to those who follow him.

<sup>22</sup> 'Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?'

They still have no conception of the resurrection. Jesus will be taken away and crucified. But on the third day he will rise again and Mary will see him in the light of the early morning. They will see him once more in the upper room. The forces of evil will have been defeated. Think back to John 1.

<sup>10</sup> 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

This is what Jesus meant. There is nothing wrong with the world, God created it, he infuses it with his Spirit yet it has been corrupted. In God's time the newly restored creation will be completed and Christ will rule over all. What Jesus means by 'the world' here are the forces of darkness which cause people to turn their back on God. Jesus came to save the world but so many turned their back on him and finally delivered him to death. Yet those who believe, who follow his way are redeemed. That is the promise of God. There is no doubt that Jesus is warning the disciples that they will be battling against the forces of evil in the world. Indeed many will die for his sake but the word of God will never be defeated. What Jesus does in this reading is put the two side by side,

<sup>23</sup> 'Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup>Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

Human beings have free will, to walk in God's way or to turn their back on him. The disciples are Jesus' followers and God will dwell in them with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Once again he reiterates his promise,

<sup>25</sup> 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

With the Spirit comes strength, the power to heal, the power to go out unafraid and speak. But one of the most important gifts of the Spirit is the understanding of the teachings of Jesus. These men who were so perplexed will have the scales removed from their eyes and all will fall into place. The teachings of Jesus, so hazy before, will become crystal clear and they will have the ability to impart them to others. Just as Jesus acts in his Father's name they will act in the name of Jesus. They will do nothing in their own strength. Think of Peter before he heals when he says, 'In the name of Jesus.'

What Jesus does next reminds us of what he says in the upper room on the eve of the resurrection. <sup>27</sup> 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'

If only we, in our troubles, could hear the words of Jesus giving his deep peace, the peace of God to us. This is the peace which 'passes all understanding' and is able to bring calm where before there was tumult and fear. This is nothing like the peace the world gives. No, only God can give true peace. It is earned too, only the true follower of Jesus can really know it. You cannot commit to the world's ways and God's. There must be no collusion, no compromise. Jesus' words, 'follow me' are spoken to us all and he expects our allegiance to him to be wholehearted. The powers of darkness are still at large in the world as we see each day but the power of the God of love is stronger and always will be. To all who truly follow him he gives the promise of true peace.

<sup>28</sup> 'You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup>And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.'

The powers of darkness are gathering around Jesus. He knows exactly what is about to happen, the disciples do not. He has prepared them for what is to come. Yes, they may fail initially but they will be strengthened and they will carry on his work.

<sup>30</sup> 'I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; <sup>31</sup>but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.'

It is important that before the arrest and crucifixion they understand that Jesus is walking in God's way. Indeed Pilate would have no power over him 'unless it was given from above.' Only by walking the way of the cross can Jesus fight the battle with evil at Calvary, only by his death can he rise to glorious new life on Easter morning and conquer the powers of evil and death forever. The disciples will look back on events with the understanding Jesus has given here, as do we. It will be their hope and the 'world' will never win. Ultimately good will triumph over evil. We walk in the way of Jesus Christ who is one with the Father and we celebrate the coming of the Spirit on those first followers at Pentecost in a few weeks. We thank God that the same Holy Spirit dwells with us to strengthen and sustain us.

If we look at Luke's accounts in the Acts of the Apostles we see the transformation that the coming of the Holy Spirit made. These men are hardly recognisable as those disciples at the Last Supper. We have seen Peter raising Dorcas to new life through the power of Jesus. Saul, breathing fire and brimstone, was literally stopped in his tracks and turned to Jesus, becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles. Such is the power of God! Dorcas was described as a 'disciple,' she was then, a follower of Jesus and lived in Joppa. She was someone who cared about the poor and as a talented needle woman she made clothes to help widows. Now, in today's reading, we have an account of another woman, Lydia. To put this reading into its context Paul had just chosen another helper, Timothy. His mother was Jewish but his father was Greek. Timothy joined Paul and Silas on their missionary journey.

<sup>6</sup> 'They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup>When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; <sup>8</sup>so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.'

Last time we saw Peter receive a vision. Sometimes these experiences are expressed as a vision, sometimes the Spirit of Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. I think if we use the term the power from on high we are near the mark. After travelling all this way Paul receives a vision. This time it is a man begging him to go to Macedonia. It is important to note Paul's response,

<sup>10</sup> 'When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.'

There is no question, Paul and his followers immediately obey the will of God. Another interesting point is that the author uses the word 'we'. Is Luke then accompanying them too? Just look at the writing, it is typical of Luke; it is so exact, almost a cross between a historical account, a diary and a guide book. It is certainly accurate in geographical detail.

<sup>11</sup> 'We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup>and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.'

I have said previously that Philippi was swollen with Roman veterans after the battle which ended the civil war following the death of Julius Caesar. Afterwards many other veterans settled there. It was a cosmopolitan city and that was reflected in its culture and gods. Roman deities would have been worshipped and the cult of Emperor Worship would have been established. This was a Greek city and so Greek gods would have been worshipped. What there was not however was a strongly established Jewish community. Just imagining landing in a strange region, knowing no one and with nowhere to stay. This is the centre for the worship of pagan gods and yet God has instructed you to

bring his word to them. It is a very dangerous commission as we will see later, but this is Paul's mission. This is what God requires. The first thing to do would be to meet with other Jews yet there is no synagogue.

<sup>13</sup> 'On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.'

This then is a place of prayer to the one true God, and notice it is women who are praying there. Paul and his companions join them; there is none of the Jewish prejudice against women. One particular woman makes herself known. Dorcas was described as a 'disciple' a Christian, but Lydia is called a 'worshipper of God' she was not Jewish. She lived in a pagan community but she had chosen this religion and she joined with the other women to pray to God. Once again Luke is specific.

<sup>14</sup> 'A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.'

I didn't know anything at all about Thyatira so I looked it up. In those days Thyatira stood on the border between Lydia and Mysia and in Roman times was a famous centre for dyeing, specifically for producing purple cloth. This then is Lydia's trade; she is a business woman and a fairly well to do one. Purple cloth was expensive. Purple of course was associated with royalty and still is. Lydia is fascinated by what these men are teaching, she does not just listen she acts.

'The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup>When she and her household were baptised, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.'

It is a simple but wonderful story. You can imagine her hanging on their every word, hearing of the one true God who was incarnate and walked among humans, who gave his life on Calvary but who rose from the dead to bring salvation. He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell with all who believe. Lydia has no doubts, she and her household are baptised. That isn't just her immediate family that is servants and all. Next she offers exactly what the apostles are in need of, somewhere safe to stay. She, like Dorcas, doesn't just accept Jesus, she does something positive about it. Dorcas helps the poor widows with her talent. Lydia opens her home. Very soon Paul and his helpers will be in need of a safe refuge! We will read of the dangers they run into in Philippi next week.

The lessons of Dorcas and Lydia are lessons for us all. We may not be destined to perform great things in Jesus' name as the apostles were but we can all give what we have. We can all show practical Christianity and commit ourselves to serve him and others wholeheartedly.

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

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