

“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, John 14. 15-21

Today’s gospel is from the Gospel according to St John. It follows on immediately from last week’s gospel during which Jesus tells the disciples that he is going before them to prepare abiding places/dwelling places for them in God’s house and also and importantly that their post-resurrection ministry will be summed up in three words: believing, praying and doing. They are to believe in God and in Him, because God and Jesus abide in one another. It is Jesus who is close to the Father’s heart as we already read in John’s prologue. They, the disciples, will do greater works than Jesus. Jesus’ works witness to the Father. Our works in like manner are to witness to the reality and love of God for the world. Their prayers will be answered. Lastly, we underlined that Jesus was not speaking to the disciples individually, but as the eleven who remained with Him in the Upper Room after Judas’ departure on Maundy Thursday.

In the context of today the fracturing of Christian community/churches into collections of individuals who happen to gather as individuals to form Christian community is one that the Farewell Discourse does not share... Rather Jesus addresses the disciples as a community, as a collective, and within that community individuals have questions. Thomas asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Philip asks, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” In my mind we are sorely hindered if we fail to live community/fellowship as the Body of Christ preferring an individualistic approach. This is why the call to gather regularly cannot be based on how I feel from one Sunday to the next. How it fits into my social life. There is not only a work/life balance to be maintained, but one that includes and is informed by faith. The most telling remark in recent memory was someone saying to me with a hint of eagerness, “Oh, I would like to join the Zoom worship...” And after a moment’s reflection without batting an eyelid, “I can’t, I have yoga. I will join you next week...” There is a tension to be held and lived.

There is something called commitment. To gather is to witness to the world and to encourage one another. Something we have experienced over the last eight Sundays.

Jesus has told the disciples that he is going before them, while assuring them as we heard today that he will not leave them comfortless. He will not leave them orphaned. He will send an advocate. One who speaks on their behalf to God, as Jesus does. The images are strong. The word translated here as Advocate means the one who comes alongside. God has come alongside humanity in Jesus Christ. He who is close to the Father's heart. The Holy Spirit comes alongside the disciples taking Jesus' place. Jesus has been leading them into truth. The Spirit will continue to lead them into truth. This image of coming alongside is one that we are familiar with from St Luke's Gospel. It is the Gospel that we have already heard this Eastertide and is often referred to as *The walk to Emmaus*.

Luke paints a picture of Jesus joining two of the disciples who are fleeing Jerusalem on their walk to Emmaus. Jesus comes alongside them. He walks with them. He converses with them. He stays with them, when asked, and there makes himself known in the breaking of the bread. This resurrection appearance paints a picture of what the church is. We as a people, the Body of Christ, are on a journey. There is a destination to which we headed. The disciples will say to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' (Luke 24:32) Does this passage awaken false expectations in us? I think not. I believe we know such moments, where words and passages of the Bible have done just that – warmed our hearts – or when Christians have opened up the scriptures to us concerning the things of God or when Christians have risen to the challenge of doing the works of God in acts of charity and service in witnessing to the truth and in going the extra mile. At its best the Christian community is an inspiring community because it is spirit filled. Let the expression of our Christian faith be resistant to describing the Holy Spirit as the shy member of the Trinity.

Today's Gospel speaks of the Advocate, the one who comes alongside us, as the Spirit of truth. John the Evangelist is concerned with truth. It is in John's Gospel that Pilate asks,

“What is truth?” Already in the prologue of John we hear these words, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1.14) And a few sentences later, “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1.17) And something would be amiss if I didn’t reference the Scriptural motto of the Anglican Communion as inscribed on the Anglican Communion flag that we hoist Sunday by Sunday “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8.32) We can have confidence in this truth because it sets us free from sin and death to life now and life eternal.

What is this truth of which Jesus speaks? It is the truth about God and God’s good purposes. It is the truth about sin and death. It is the truth about creation. “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1.31), but also that creation is subject to ineffectiveness/futility (Romans 8.20). It is the truth about God’s saving, reconciling, atoning work in creation summed up in words by St Paul, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5.8) How we appropriate this truth of which Jesus speaks and live out of its centre is the challenge that is set and you can say that it has been tearing the Anglican Communion apart, as well as forming new Communion based on the same heritage of belief, but with different weightings. Diversity is desirable as is unity. Community is desirable, but also individuality. Unity and diversity should not be collapsed into one another, nor should community and individuality, but rather the tension inhering between them should be preserved, enabling a conversation to take place that respects each and gives food for life.

Today our church building is once again open for public worship. To begin with a few of us will gather in that public and sacred space set aside for prayer and worship to hear God’s word, to be reminded that we are made in God’s image (the *imago dei*), to be convicted of our sin, to ask God’s forgiveness, to share his peace and to be fed by him reminded at every moment and each step along the way of God’s love for us, while being turned to one another and turned to the world. We thank God today that God has safely brought us at

Christ Church to this moment. I am grateful for all who have supported me since 16 March. We are mutually grateful for all those who have been keeping an eye out for one another. We are grateful to those who remained faithful in prayer and for those who gathered for Sunday worship. We are grateful for those who made money donations during the weeks to make up for lost income. We are grateful to those who are already thinking and planning on how to strengthen Christ Church in the weeks and months that lie ahead. We are already planning for the autumn knowing that we may well need to jettison our plans should a second wave of infection arise. Together we are grateful for those who have reopened the shop and for those who have the technical knowhow to use Zoom.

In the midst of the crisis as experienced in Austria the church council made a bold step, a momentous decision even, to ensure that in the near future we can livestream our services. There are various aspects to this decision. I will mention three. One, the decision was made to meet an immediate pastoral need. Many are not ready to venture into shared public spaces. Two, in the medium term recognising the age demographics, but also other reasons like distance to church, we want to ensure that those who can't get to church can still join us for worship Sunday by Sunday. Three, we recognise that even if we only wanted to maintain what God has entrusted to us we need to build today for tomorrow. We believe that God's mission in which we are called to participate is well served by taking this step. We are making this investment because we want to share the truth about God who has come alongside us in Jesus Christ and is alongside us in the Holy Spirit – always doing this with the right measure of deference, given that many find it difficult to cross the doorstep of a church. Our hope is that by livestreaming our services we can lower people's psychological barriers, their Hemmschwelle. We believe – I am speaking for myself now but with some confidence that the churchwardens and council members agree – we believe that the Anglican Tradition as a particular expression of the Christian faith is a life-giving, faithful and appropriate expression of the Christian faith in which unity and diversity, as well as community and individuality can be held in creative tension and lived well. The truth to which we want to witness is the truth that God has made known in Jesus Christ and into which Jesus led the way. This work of leading us into truth is now carried on

by the Holy Spirit, who is leading us and all who love God into life. It is a truth not of our own making; that is why we must wrestle with it. We serve the truth of God revealed. Made manifest!

In today's Gospel Jesus makes it plain. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments". The first use of the language of commandment comes after Jesus testifies to himself and affirms that it is the God the Father who has sent him. He has been commissioned. Surprisingly, God's commandment is eternal life. Hear what Jesus says, "And I know that his commandment is eternal life." (John 12.50) Last week I began by taking us back to Maundy Thursday and the washing of the disciples' feet. Having washed their feet Jesus again uses the language of commandment. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (John 13.34) Having those two references in mind and considering the context in which Jesus is speaking the commandments Jesus is referring to our life (eternal life) and love. These are intertwined. God has one commandment and that is eternal life defined by love. His love leads to eternal life. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that everyone who believes should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3.16) It is for this reason that the disciples are commanded to love one another as a demonstration of their love for Jesus as they abide in him, who abides in the Father, and with the Holy Spirit alongside them makes eternal life possible for others not of the sheepfold.