

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**

**Collect**

Risen Christ,  
by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:  
help your Church to obey your command  
and draw the nations to the fire of your love,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

**Acts 17:22-31**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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, 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. 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, 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. 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.'

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. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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."

**John 14:15-21**

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 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.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 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."

## Sermon

Over the last couple of weeks, I have enjoyed reading articles in both the Spectator and New Statesman (trying to aim for political balance) about the current situation – and indeed anything else they decide to write about. Of course there are a few occasions when I want to throw things across the room in disagreement, but on the whole what has struck me is the uncertainty of our current situation. While strong opinions are expressed, some more concerned about the state of the economy, and others more anxious about the threat to health, I rarely read an article in which someone claims to actually know the right answer. We are living with the unknown, and while that doesn't stop people from having opinions, it makes consensus quite hard to find.

One of the things people appear to enjoy expressing opinions about is what will be the lessons we learn from this pandemic. Not so much in practical terms, but rather how will public opinion change? How will we be different, socially and emotionally, in months and years to come? We hear a great deal about our renewed appreciation for the NHS, and there appears to be significant hope that this appreciation will continue and perhaps be transformed into better resourcing in the future. It has also been interesting to see who classes as a key worker in these circumstances. Will this change our children's views of what they consider to be worthwhile and fulfilling future careers?

What often strikes me as I read articles about what lessons we might learn is how much easier it is to generalise about "what society might learn" than it is to really focus in on what I as an individual might discover from this current situation. When we talk about learning to appreciate the NHS, how many of us are actually thinking that we are the people who *didn't* value the NHS? It can feel safer to hypothesise about generic lessons that should be learnt than to start to ask *ourselves* what it is that *we* might be being called to understand differently as individuals.

This morning's gospel reading contains Jesus's promise to his disciples of the Holy Spirit. This passage is a continuation of last Sunday's reading, part of the Farewell Discourse, as Jesus spoke to his disciples in that Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper. Having told them that he is the way, the truth and the life, he now goes on to promise that once he departs, they will not be left alone, but will rather receive the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word used here is *parakletos*, which can be variously translated advocate, comforter, counsellor and helper. It is probably fair to say that Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit includes all of these aspects, and perhaps more. It is also interesting that, while Luke's gospel tends to suggest that the Holy Spirit has been heavily active in the lives of his characters from the beginning of his gospel until the end of Acts (also written by Luke), John insists that the Holy Spirit will only come after Jesus himself departs. This isn't about one of the gospel writers getting it right and the other getting it wrong. Rather, it is about different emphases. In Luke-Acts, the gospel writer presents everything that happens as the work of the Holy Spirit. John chooses to focus on the revelatory function of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit. While Jesus is present revealing the nature of God, the Holy Spirit would be redundant, but once Jesus has departed, the Holy Spirit continues to fulfil that function. And while Jesus was limited in time and space, the Holy Spirit allows each of us to continue Jesus's work, with the Spirit alive within us.

This sense of the Holy Spirit abiding in each of us is perhaps a starting point for our attempts to grasp what it might be that this current situation is teaching us. Instead of falling back on broader lessons for society, there is something about our relationship with the Holy Spirit and the way that the Holy

Spirit might be acting through us, that might help us to discover what God is calling us to at this time.

Before we start to explore, it's worth noticing that everything Jesus says here is infused with love. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And if we look back in John's gospel, there is in fact only one commandment that Jesus gives: "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) And this is reiterated in the following chapter: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) So whatever it is that we are being called to learn and discover, however it is that we are being shown we might grow, must be infused with love.

So I wonder, where have you seen love during lockdown? Perhaps try to focus on the specific and individual. How have you been touched by acts of kindness or generosity? What has surprised you by having an impact greater than you might have expected? And think too about the things that you have done – even the smallest of things – that you know to have been driven by love.

Whether we like it or not, lockdown has given us all the possibility of greater introspection and self-examination. For some of you that will be something you find ways to avoid, while others will welcome time for reflection. In a sense that initial reaction is already an interesting starting point. I wonder how many of us have found that, in these unusual circumstances, aspects of our personalities that we were already aware of have been heightened? If you are a person who likes routine, have you found ways to make new routines? And if you prefer spontaneity, how has that manifested itself? Knowing ourselves is important if we are to discover what God is calling us to, because each of us is likely to learn different things and grow in different ways, because of our uniqueness, and the different callings on our lives.

I wonder, too, whether you have discovered new things spiritually? What is it that you miss most about church? And what do you not miss? What aspects of worshipping at home do you enjoy? And what have you found to be unhelpful? There are no right or wrong answers to this, but each of us will be exploring our relationship with God in different ways.

While there is little doubt that lockdown has affected some of us more than others, not one of us has really been untouched. I will no doubt continue to enjoy the opinions the writers of various publications express about what we will learn from this pandemic, but the question I keep coming back to is what God is asking me to learn and discover. If it's any consolation to you, I haven't found the answer yet. Perhaps I never fully will. But this week's gospel reading is the closest I have come to a starting point. Because it is a reminder that, if I take the time to remember, the Holy Spirit does indeed dwell with – and indeed within - me, and can help me to see where it is that I might be going. As a counsellor, a helper, an advocate and a comforter. And always surrounded and held by a love that never lets any of us go.

Amen