

Reflection for 2020-05-17 (Lent 6)

John 14: 15-21

We're still in the season of Easter, the season when we remember that Jesus was God Incarnate, God living with us as a human being. And especially that His Incarnation ended with a sacrificial death and a glorious resurrection that bring victory over death and sin, and so bring life to the whole of God's Creation.

But today's reading comes from just before Easter, from the last evening Jesus spent with His disciples. And He spends time trying to prepare them for what is coming: he wants them prepared to live without Him.

So, Jesus says to them: if you love me, obey my commands.

Love for me, He says, means obeying me. Which sounds odd - we don't tend to think of love and obedience as being connected.

A little earlier in this speech from John's Gospel, Jesus summarised all His teaching like this: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you." And he *had* given plenty of other commands during His ministry, too: to treat others as we want them to treat us; to do good in secret so we avoid praise from other people; to seek God's Kingdom above all else.

He had even summed up the whole of the Jewish law and prophets in two commands: to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to love our neighbour as ourself.

Obedience to Jesus, then, means to act with love. And not just a little love but total, self-giving, sacrificial love. His disciples may not have fully realised this as He spoke on Thursday evening but, on Good Friday and finally on Easter Sunday, they saw what Jesus's love really meant.

So, then, love is what we do when we're obedient to Jesus.

But Jesus said in this passage that our love for Him is what should *lead to* obedience to His commands. Love leads to obedience, and obedience leads to love.

Love clearly means actions, not feelings, for Jesus. You can't command feelings, can't choose them! Love is about how we *treat* other people, how we support them, how we put their needs before our own.

So, if we love Jesus, we must act with love to each other.

Do this, Jesus says, and I will ask the Father to send you a Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. This looks forward to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, and to the life of the Church that will follow.

But what is a 'Comforter'? In some other versions of this passage, this is translated as 'Helper' or 'Advocate'. So, then, the Holy Spirit is God coming alongside us, comforting us as we face our lives, standing with us in trouble, showing us the Way.

In the Old Testament, in the stories and traditions that the disciples and Jesus Himself grew up with, God was always with His people, always supporting them. But the relationship was somewhat distant and always mediated. Individual Jews had generally needed the Temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood, to be connected to God and to hear from God.

The prophets, though, had looked forward to a time when, as Joel said, God would pour out His Spirit on *all* people, so that the young would prophesy and see visions, and the old would dream dreams. A day when everyone would know God, with no temple or priests needed to bridge the gap between the human and the divine. A day when young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile would alike know God directly and intimately.

This, after all, is what the Incarnation itself is about: God becoming Human. Love reaching out and in the process exposing itself to hate and fear and death.

In Jesus, God bridges the gaps. All of the gaps. The Incarnation is the ultimate declaration by God that there is no division that God cannot and will not break down in order to reach those God loves. Which is everything and everyone that God has created.

And, Jesus says, even when He dies and returns to the Father, we will not be left alone. He will send the Holy Spirit to us, to keep us directly connected to God.

These are the days, Jesus says, that the prophets looked forward to, when God and His people would be one.

However, Jesus says, the World can't accept this Spirit, because the World does not recognise Him. The World, the people created by God, do not recognise God's Holy Spirit.

The World does not know God because it does not accept Jesus, does not obey His commands, does not love. And so, it doesn't know the Spirit, can't *accept* the Spirit, because the Spirit is alien to it.

The Holy Spirit is sent to and accepted by those who obey Jesus by loving God and their neighbour – those who show that love in their actions, not only in their feelings.

This Spirit connects us directly to God. The Spirit is God living directly within us. The Spirit is that presence of God that was always there, now present in a new, greater, more powerful way.

The Spirit provides comfort in times of loss. The Spirit provides support in times of need. The Spirit provides wisdom in times of uncertainty.

Jesus says to His disciples that He will die and leave them, but His Father will not leave them as orphans. The Comforter, the Spirit will come. Even though the disciples are losing Jesus, they will be comforted by the presence of the Spirit. They'd lived alongside Jesus the Son of God for 3 years. Now, they'd live the rest of their lives with the Holy Spirit of God living and active inside them.

Jesus said to His disciples that they would carry out miracles as great or even greater than those He had done. And the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will come to give them power to preach, to teach, to inspire, and to heal. The Holy Spirit would build the Church.

Jesus said to His disciples that they would see God's Kingdom. And the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, would give them wise words when faced with opposition, would give them wisdom to change their selves when faced with the new things of God's Kingdom bursting to life.

I am in my Father, says Jesus, and you in me, and I in you.

The Spirit lives in us. Life with God, union with God, is already real. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, has been poured out on us, on all God's children. We need to make the Spirit shown in our hearts, in our minds and above all in our actions.

If we accept God's gift of the Holy Spirit in love, then we will have comfort in our losses, help in our need, and wisdom in our troubles. Jesus never leaves us alone. When He departs, He sends the Holy Spirit to be with us.

So, Jesus says in today's reading that, if we love Him, we must obey Him. And to obey Him, we must love God and love each other. If we do this, we can expect Jesus to send us the Holy Spirit to provide Comfort, Help, Support. And we can expect that the Spirit will make real the oneness with God that Jesus says is already within us.

However broken, however weak, however unworthy we feel, Jesus loves us. And He will send the Holy Spirit to make us whole. His grace is sufficient for us.

At Easter, we remember that Jesus came to Earth and lived as a man, and died to save us. Not just as a one-off action but as the beginning of something great: as the beginning of God's life in the world through the gift of the Holy Spirit.