

St Brandon's, Sermon for 14th May 2023.

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

And I in You

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In the Gospel of John that we heard last week, we heard the verses immediately preceding these. We heard Thomas saying to Jesus, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* And Jesus replying, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*

Those words, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life"*, give us a sense of Jesus being out there, in the world; guiding us in the way we live our lives, drawing us into loving acts of service, finding him in Christian fellowship and community.

God who has created the world desiring us to help in his work of healing and redeeming, in the way Jesus showed us; walking in Jesus' footsteps, following his way. Christian Aid envelopes, Messy Church provision, at least three church meetings I'm aware of in this coming week: these are today's examples of such work at St Brandon's. Does the very thought of it make you

feel weary and unequal to the task? It certainly can have that effect on me!

This week, in today's verses we hear how Jesus is going to give us the necessary support to do this. How he is going to bridge our human frailty and fallibility and give us the help that makes some of this conceivable and inspires us to attempt more than we alone could.

The disciples had been with Jesus for three years of intensive learning and discovery. Jesus inspired them to go out and spread the good news and heal. They went as missionaries because he helped them believe more fully in God and in themselves. He encouraged them and opened their eyes to see God at work in the world, and God revealed in the person of Jesus, right beside them. Jesus was always there to encourage and admonish, to reveal connections, to expose the work of God and of the devil so they could see the subtle ways temptation drew people away from God, and love of the neighbour brought them into alignment with God.

They loved him, they relied on him; they must have been terrified when he talked of leaving them.

So, he reassures them, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* If they stay trusting and keep their hearts attuned to all he has shown them – if they continue responding to that love, they will find they are following his teachings and doing his work – keeping his commandments. However, he is also going to provide a really pro-active means of assisting with that.

Jesus is going to return initially as a visible presence, visible only to them. They are going to see the risen Christ, *“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me”*. This is the evidence that will certify that he is forever living, returned to the Father; of God, in God, is God.

Furthermore, Jesus, *“will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever”*. Jesus in his human form is the Advocate that *cannot* be with them forever but Jesus in a Spirit form can and will.

Jesus speaks very ambiguously about this Spirit of Truth, using phrases that he has applied to himself. The prevailing impression is that the Spirit, whilst having a separate identity to him, is of him, imparts him.

Jesus says, *“The world cannot receive [The Spirit], because it neither sees him nor knows him”*. This is exactly how he speaks of the unbelievers: those who neither see nor know him as the one sent by his Father: these unbelievers can't receive the Spirit because they could not receive him.

But Jesus says to the disciples, *“You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”*

Abides *with* you?

It is precisely the fact that Jesus does live with them that they are so worried about his leaving. He seems to be saying that he *is* the Spirit, the Spirit is the essence of him, whom they know so well, he, Jesus will be living not alongside but *within* each of them.

This is the Holy Spirit that will come upon the believers at Pentacost, a matter of days after they see the risen Christ ascend into heaven. This Holy Spirit will replace Jesus and that access to the Father through him – he does not leave them parentless, orphaned.

So, what about us? We have not had the disciples experience of being with the human Jesus. We come in the category of ‘those who are blessed because they have not seen, yet believe.’

That phrase always makes me squirm a little, and I reach to qualify it with that other great statement, *“Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief!”*

As we make that plea, it is the Holy Spirit within us that leaps to our rescue. We, too, are endowed with the same Spirit of Truth that was supplied to the first disciples, that is the fulfilling of the promise that this Spirit is with us forever: throughout our lives, throughout all generations of believers.

The Spirit dwells in us for the same purposes: to console, witness, encourage us to remember Jesus' work, lead us into the whole truth.

But there is a sort of reverse task that the Spirit has to undertake in us. Those first disciples knew the person Jesus easily and intimately and heard his word first hand from his very lips.

We have to come to this easy and intimate knowledge of Jesus and his word through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has to make known to us, the living Christ. And this will happen if we meet the Spirit half-way and join in with the task. It is work that is never finished, it will continue beyond our lifetime but there will be a building relationship, one where now and again we can say of ourselves, back to Jesus Christ, *"On this day, you know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."*

Saints, the great spiritual writers, those whom we perhaps know who immerse themselves in seeking, find and speak of, a unity with Christ that they have at times experienced.

I don't think they are super-holy people, in some impossible to attain way. I think they are people that have deeply wanted to overcome their own reticence and accept that they are accepted by God: accept his love, accept his commission, accept that they are beloved, giving up the withholding of those parts of themselves they are ashamed of to stand fully in his sight, fully in his light.

When we can release ourselves into one-ness with Jesus Christ, we are fully freed to love, believe and follow, keeping his commandments as a natural response and outcome of loving: wanting to give gifts to the one who loves and gifts us.

The Holy Spirit – the presence of Jesus within us – first makes itself known when the tentative seeker longs for 'something' to fill a hole in themselves. They feel a desire for a spiritual 'something' to be with them, in them, a spirit they can live and move and have their very being held by. At this stage, it is an unknown God who is calling to them, and, should they move towards exploring Christianity, the Spirit in them will start to

have space to grow and expand, helping them make faith connections.

Every one of us here lie somewhere on that spectrum of knowledge/relationship and one-ness with Jesus Christ. Every one of us here have the ability to go deeper, to seek and find the fullness of God that dwells in us through the presence of Jesus in the Holy Spirit IN us. Lord Jesus, reveal yourself to us, we pray. *Amen.*