St Brandon's, Sermon for 25th May 2025.
Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29
"Intimate connection"

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Imagine you are at the leave-taking of your dearest friend, your mentor, the one who loves you especially and from whom you receive and learn everything worthwhile about life and how to steer a good path through it, survive and even delight in life despite the tough challenges and setbacks. Its true, your companion is still with you, but they are setting off for good, to a far away, and unknown destination. Soon they will be gone. "We'll keep in touch. I'll call you. Call me any time, I'll just be at the other end of the phone," they say. We've heard it before. Poor consolation, it never lasts, this 'keeping in touch'. Gradually the intervals will widen, it will shrink to Christmas cards with Round Robin letters; then to just a card with a scribbled signature …

We feel the loss and bleakness even before they are gone. Knowing they are going, knowing we are going to have to live without their enriching support, their liveliness and timely, wise words that so often have brought us hope and relief is a troubling prospect. Fear for ourselves and how we will cope, colours our feelings, crowds out any thoughts about their future life in another place – a whole different world to ours.

This is the loss and bleakness of the disciples as they share this last supper with Jesus. This is his leave-taking, and it is filling them with confusion, they have troubled and fearful hearts. They cannot understand or comprehend what he keeps repeating in different ways. Repeatedly, he tells them he is going and coming back in a new way; tells them - commands them - to love him, and love one another, then he will send to them: that he will keep in touch in a new and intimate way.

Back to our departing friend: Imagine how much better it would be if we knew we could facetime our departing friend at any time of day or night. In reality, we wouldn't dare, except in a crisis. We would respect their time, their availability, their need for doing everything that makes up the rest of their life. We would weigh up, hesitate, and make an agreement about

when is convenient to call. “But I love hearing from you”, our friend protests. But its just not the same as when we shared the same house, jogged through breakfast together, and knew we’d be able to catch up on the day over supper. The small details of the day, and our feelings, shared readily, each with the other in mutual love and confidence. Calling, even on facetime, is not going to be a substitute for all that.

Two thousand years ago there was no telephone, no facetime and precious few messages and letters would travel significant distances. There was simply no logic to what Jesus was repeatedly telling his disciples. No mechanism they could picture or construct from what he is saying about going, and coming, and the way. Peter asks, “Where are you going?”, “Why can I not follow you now?” Thomas, moments later protests, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”, asks another.

Jesus responds with images of homes, of vines, of an interconnected intimacy that is as real as the branch’s need of the trunk and root. Of drawing the disciples into the same interconnectedness with himself as he has with his father: they will be parented, not orphaned; saved not lost.

Something called the Advocate, the helper, the Holy Spirit will be sent to teach them everything, remind them what Jesus has said to them, lead them into truth, testify on his behalf.

They are not going to get it, and all Jesus can do is explain with metaphors and images to try and make the information and instructions stick until the time when he can put the promises into action, and they can believe.
Believe he knew what lay ahead,
Believe it is truly Jesus in Spirit who is now with them in this new and intimate,
Believe he truly was and is all he described: that He, along with the Father and Holy Spirit, form the One God.

Of course, *we* do not start where the disciples did with the human friend, Jesus, we start from the other end; the process has to work backwards in us. We start with the potential to receive the Holy Spirit, and through that, to come to know and believe in God and in Jesus, alive today, and believe what was achieved through his human life. That potential to receive the Holy Spirit is in every single human being. It may not be taken up, but it is not denied to anyone, ever.

Last Sunday, Geoff identified the two criteria by which those who came after Jesus' death and ascension were recognised as followers of God in Jesus Christ.

The criteria were: they had accepted the word of God, and they had received the Holy Spirit.

This is neatly seen in the Acts passage today, where Lydia, already a worshipper of God, had her heart opened by the Lord to hear the words of Paul and be baptised, along with her household, baptism bringing the Holy Spirit.

However, I think those two criteria also approximate to the opening lines in today's gospel reading, 'Jesus said to his disciples, "*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*."'

Here, Love is the key word, and first step.
'*Not that we loved him but that he loved us*', John reminds us in the first of his letters.
Through one means or another we become aware of the love God extends to all creation, and to us.
When we receive love, we instinctively respond in love; we might initially name it 'gratitude'; shyly and uncertainly perhaps at first – maybe passionately if we've been bowled over by a conversion experience – the us/God relationship gets started.
Not only is the love response in us directed towards God, but it tends to start showing up as an increased capacity and tendency to show love to other people. God's love is sort of insuppressibly infectious, somehow!

Therefore, at what point we say the Holy Spirit has come upon us, is, I think, a moot point.
There are those who would limit it to the formal conferring of the Holy Spirit through baptism.
This gospel passage seems to suggest otherwise.
It seems to suggest that responding to the God who loves us, and keeping his word, is sufficient to initiate the Holy Spirit: God coming to them and making His home in them. I am not going to elaborate on this theme, except to say this too, has implications for how inclusive a church we are: who is 'in' and who is 'out'.

A sure way to know if the Holy Spirit is at work in someone is by the outworking of the Spirit.
The fruit of the Spirit, Paul notes in his letter to the Galatians, *'is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'*, these are the characteristics of the Holy Spirit.
This is not too hard to spot in another person, and in ourselves if we pause to consider our behaviour, and how faith may be developing it.
It takes rather more practise and attention to tune into the subtler movement of the Holy Spirit in us.
Jesus says, *'the Holy Spirit will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you*.' This takes listening, and attention, and noticing. It requires practising these things to become attuned to the prompts and messages of the Spirit in us: Paul was sufficiently attuned to be '*convinced that God had called them to Macedonia'*

The way the Spirit imparts knowledge comes differently to the knowledge our own thoughts impart.
For example, I wonder how many of you, hearing the phrase, '*the peace of God which passes all understanding'*, feel a surge of recognition because you have experienced that quality of peace?
That's the peace Jesus meant when he said,
"*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives*".
No, the world gives the kind of peace that comes from material fixes, problems being dealt with, until the next problem comes along.

Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, gives us peace despite, and in the midst of the problems and lack of material fixes; it arises from within, is attainable through prayer and bestowed on us as a sudden grace.

The indwelling helper, that replaces Jesus for those first disciples, is the voice of Jesus in us, bringing him to us as friend and intimate. It is the ever-available, ever-loving, ever-attentive companion that we are promised will never leave us; no human companion can match this continual presence in us, nor lead us as the Holy Spirit does, into belief.