

Easter 6

Sunday 17th May 2020



Readings:

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

Jesus said, '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 for ever. 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.'

Reflection

We have had some weeks focussing on the resurrection and resurrection appearances; we saw some disciples experiencing doubt and asking hard questions, and we saw the group huddling together in a secret location for safety, reminding us of our own situation.

But, for the last two Sundays, we have now gone back to Maundy Thursday to look at some of Jesus' last teaching to his disciples. Last week we heard Jesus say that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Today's Gospel passage follows immediately what we read last week and gives us some of the implications – and also a glimpse forward to Pentecost.

Whereas last week's message was a very comforting one, today we are given a challenge. If we really believe those words of Jesus, and if we really love him, we will keep his commandments. This is not a diktat – it is a simple statement of fact – IF we love him, we WILL obey his commandments. Perhaps we should substitute that IF with SINCE because surely that is the implication. Obedience is, or should be a natural response, to show our love by doing what we know he wants and expects of us. And, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus is also beginning to prepare the disciples for life without him. He wants them to understand that they will be able to be his followers even without his physical presence. In fact, they will need an even deeper understanding within themselves of what it means to follow him, when they can no longer hear his words every day.

So, what are these commandments that he asks his followers to keep as a token of their love? You could, of course, make quite a long list, but fundamentally they all hinge on the single commandment that he gave them in the previous chapter, when he told them to love one another as he has loved them. (John 13:34) If we can only keep that commandment, all the others will slot into place.

You will know that the New Testament was originally written in Greek which often gives translators a headache, as the language then had a relatively small vocabulary. But when it came to "love" the Greeks were very specific. They had six – some would say seven – words for love and each word defined love in a particular form. The word we find here, repeated at least four times in verse 21 alone, is *agape*. *Agape* is perhaps the most radical version of love expressed in Greek. This selfless love was extended to everyone, from family members to total strangers. C.S. Lewis referred to it as 'gift love,' the highest form of Christian love. It is this self-giving, indiscriminate love that Jesus demonstrated to his disciples when he knelt down to wash their feet. It's the kind of love he showed on the cross. It's the kind of indiscriminate, selfless love he offers to us, and commands us to offer to each other. It's a tall order. Jesus knew this – and he also knew that we would not be able to obey this commandment without a lot of help which is why he promises to send an "advocate" for precisely that purpose, an advocate who will be with us forever. (14:16) It is a promise that points us towards Pentecost which we will celebrate in a couple of weeks.

And Jesus shows how well he understands the human psyche, for he tells them that he will not leave them "orphaned," a promise which has taken on a new resonance for me since losing my mother last month. He knows that when he goes, they will feel bereft, they will, indeed, feel orphaned, abandoned, alone. Which is why he takes this opportunity to tell them that, not only will he not leave them alone, he will make special provision by sending the Holy Spirit. They will not see him as they were able to see Jesus, but they will be able to know him, to feel his presence, around and within them. He will help them – and us - to follow Jesus; to obey the commandments, especially that one to love one another; and he will show us that however bereft and lonely we feel, we are not alone.

Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us
to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

A traditional prayer for the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
and lighten with celestial fire;
thou the anointing Spirit art,
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.

Thy blessed unction from above
is comfort, life, and fire of love;
enable with perpetual light
the dullness of our mortal sight.

Teach us to know the Father, Son,
and thee, of both, to be but one;
that through the ages all along
this may be our endless song:

Praise to thine eternal merit,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

A prayer for a right response to the current crisis

Lord Jesus Christ,
Give us grace to obey your commandments.
You taught us to love our neighbour,
and to care for those in need
as if we were caring for you.
In this time of anxiety, give us strength
to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,
and to assure the isolated
of our love, and your love,
for your name's sake.
Amen.

Blessing

Hear the teaching of Jesus:

Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

Go now and do God’s will.

And the blessing of God almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always.

Amen