

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 17th May 2020

John 14: 15 - 21

There comes a time in everyone's life when we have to leave home and make our own way in life. It's never easy, for example, to live without the protective support of parents and to start looking after yourself, cooking for yourself, paying bills, organising your time and your life. It is not easy to leave home, and much of our time at home in our childhood is spent preparing for the moment when we have to leave.

Leaving home as a young adult is an example of a particular kind of change; change that is difficult, but necessary. It is just one example. Throughout our lives change of this nature happens. It happens at the other end of life when we retire. It happens mid-life: people move home; get divorced; change job; lose a job; suffer a bereavement.

In all these instances the security of being accustomed to our familiar lives is opened up, sometimes torn apart, or broken down, and we are cast out into an unfamiliar world. That is to say, we step out into a world, which is exactly the same as it was, but to us feels very different, transformed, because we have changed.

Jesus' disciples knew a lot about those times of wrenching, tumultuous change. They experienced it three times, and whenever they experienced it, they suffered, sometimes they were almost destroyed, but each time they emerged stronger, more determined, more faithful, and it appears more loving.

The first time it happened they were dragged away from their nets and their families, and cast onto a road that took them to Jerusalem, a place of accusation and execution. The world around them hadn't changed a bit, but for them, from their perspective, it had changed completely.

It changed again when Jesus was crucified and resurrected. They had just become accustomed to life with him, when suddenly he was gone, and once again the world, which on the surface hadn't changed a bit, was for them utterly different.

In two weeks, at Pentecost, we will read the story of how the lives of this group would change completely for a third time. Gathered in a room, they will be sent out together and inspired by a spirit of holiness; driven out from the place where they had gathered, out in to the world, out of their home, and into a world that looked the same, but which for them was again utterly different.

These kinds of tumultuous change are never easy. They are always times of struggle. Even if they are necessary because the old way of living has become unsustainable – we grew up; we lost our job; we needed to live in a bigger or smaller house; someone died – nevertheless the change to a new way of life is often more difficult than remaining in the old way, the way we have known well for years, and that is comfortable even if it is no longer tenable.

We struggle with these changes, they take their toll physically and mentally, they are dangerous, they are times when things can go either way. But come they must, and far better that we are prepared for them. Not just prepared, but also far better that we take with us, into our new world, the experience of the old world so that we know why we had to change, why the new way needs to be different.

For example, it is easier to move into a house of your own if you are clear that you had outgrown life with your parents. It is easier to move job if you are clear with yourself that your old job no longer had a future; it's easier to move on from a relationship if you know why love has broken down; it is easier to cope with a bereavement if you know that your feelings of loss now are caused by the feelings of love that you had.

Before he died, Jesus started to prepare his followers, his friends for life without him. In that preparation he became for them a spiritual presence; no longer physically present, but in spirit always there in the essence of his commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.'¹ He would be there with them in spirit in the new world whenever they broke bread together and remembered him. He would be there with them in spirit in the new world whenever they obeyed him. He told them that when they step out into the new world, on their own, for them and only for them the world would seem completely new, for they and only they had had the experience of living with him physically.

The Spirit of truth will be with you, he said in our Gospel reading this morning, '...the world cannot receive him, because the world neither sees or knows him; but you know him, because he dwells with you and is in you.'²

Our Gospel reading this morning was Jesus' words of preparation for his disciples. They didn't know it then, but he knew that they would eventually have to leave the home that was their life with him and make their own way in the world as his church. He knew that to do so, they would have to take him with them, spiritually.

He knew that it would be harder for them to step out into the world as his church than it was to leave their nets and live with him as his disciples. It would be harder to leave the house on that first Pentecost, than it had been to live with him in the world on the road to Jerusalem. They couldn't stay locked away indoors for ever. They would have to step out into the world to remake their world in his image.

In two weeks at Pentecost we will learn just how those disciples managed to make this change from being Jesus' followers on earth who locked themselves away after his crucifixion, to becoming his church in the world held together by the Holy Spirit, driven forward in mission by a spirit of holiness. This week, in this week's Gospel readings, we read how Jesus had been preparing them for that change.

There comes a time in everyone's lives when they have to leave the homes they have been living in, isolated and protected from the world. That process of leaving is always much, much harder than staying in the comfortable place where decisions are few; what ones there are, are familiar; and where we feel safe.

But, there will always come a time when we have to step out from our isolation and in to a world that for us looks completely different. It is not an easy thing to do, we will make mistakes; we will have to take risks. And when we step out from our isolation and in to a world, we will take with us the spirit of our experience indoors, at home, in isolation. That spirit of experience will help us in the struggle, to endure, to decide, and to assess risk, because we will know why we do what we do, and we will remember what our old life was like.

Church, and Sunday morning worship can be a bit like this. Here we are this morning in the company of other worshippers, a church in the presence of Jesus Christ. But, we have to

¹ John 13: 34

² John 14: 17

leave this worship space and the body of Christ on earth, and go out in to the world as Christians, on our own physically if not spiritually, to remake the world around us, the world that is so normal, but seems so different to the world we inhabit in worship. We need to be prepared; we need to take with us the spirit of our faith, our worship, of the church, of the living Christ, a Holy Spirit, and risk it.

We have to do that throughout our lives as adults. We have to do it as the church, the body of Christ, held together by his Spirit. There will come a time when we are asked, as a country, to take that brave step back outside, into a world that seems to us completely changed. We will need faith, and a spirit of holiness that binds us together as a community of love and helps us to confront our fears.

'Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?' said Peter in our Epistle this morning. 'But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.'