

The Spirit beside us

John 14: 15-21

On Sunday nights on BBC4 at 7pm at the moment you can tune in to watch the BBC Young Musician of the Year. This competition showcases some incredible young musical talent and many of us will remember Sheku Kanneh-Mason, the black cellist who won in 2016 and played at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018. He started playing at the age of 6, and just 3 years later gained the highest marks in the UK in his Grade 8 exam. Sheku, like many child prodigies, will have outgrown several cello teachers, and has gone on to do greater things than many of them ever imagined for themselves, let alone a young pupil.

But this is what Jesus promised to his disciples. At the end of last week's Bible passage from John's gospel, Jesus, having told the disciples that he was returning to God, the Father, promised that they would do even greater things than he'd been doing. His words were: *'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.'*

Now, this must have been something that surprised and shocked the disciples. How could they, as ordinary men, possibly do greater things than Jesus? When you call to mind the great things that Jesus did – turning water into wine, healing the sick, creating lunch for thousands out of a couple of fish and a few loaves, raising a little girl from the dead. How could they possibly top that?

But wasn't this what Jesus had been leading up to during his three years with the 12, that the disciples would continue his mission and his works after he left them? Wasn't *that* what his teaching and coaching had all been about? Let's think for a moment what Jesus' mission actually was: to give life, eternal life. Remember that verse that we know so well from an earlier chapter of John: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'* And in chapter 10, our reading a fortnight ago: *'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'* So, what is Jesus wanting his disciples to do after he has left them – well, it seems to be to continue to give life, eternal life, and to reveal the face and heart of God to people, in just the way he did. For God's works aren't big miracles, but all those works of simple kindness and goodness which give people life and lead them to trust in themselves and in God.

You may wonder though how the disciples are going to do this for they were very human men. None of them appeared to have been gifted in extraordinary human talent. On many occasions we read that they struggle to understand Jesus. Sometimes, like Peter, they tell him off: *'No, you shall never wash my feet!'* Or, like James and John, they think only of themselves. Remember how in chapter 10 of Mark's gospel they demand their places of honour – *'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory'*, much to the annoyance of the other disciples. Something will have to happen to change and transform them so that they will be able to do the works of Jesus, and even greater ones. In today's gospel passage, Jesus tells them how this will be:

'If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.'

That is the answer: the disciples are going to receive another Counsellor, or in the Greek, a *paraclete*, who will help them. The word *paraclete* means someone who *comes alongside* another to defend and comfort, who speaks up for and helps a weak person. And it's this *paraclete* – the Spirit of truth – who will live in them and transform them.

If we want to see what difference having the Spirit alongside you can make, we need look no further than the example of Jesus himself. In chapter 3 of Luke's gospel we read that, as Jesus was praying after his baptism by John, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying: *'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'* We then read in the next chapter that Jesus, *full* of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led into the desert where, for forty days and with no food to eat, he was tempted by the devil. Feeling utterly exhausted, he then faces three temptations – to turn stones into bread; to receive all the kingdoms of the world if only he worships the devil; and to throw himself off the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem trusting that the angels will protect him.

And three times Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, refuses. You sense that the wilderness, for all its barrenness and scarcity of food and water, has been a place where Jesus has drawn close to God the Father, in the company of the Spirit. And it's from his struggle in the wilderness, that Jesus looks ahead to the final temptation that will face him in the Garden of Gethsemane – the temptation to avoid the cross.

Over these last 8 weeks, it may be that some of us have felt we're in wildernesses of our own. But rather than being negative experiences, these *can*, if we let them, be times and places free from distraction where we can draw close to God. And from those places, we can look ahead at our own Jerusalems: times and places where we face crisis, loss, pain and death. We may already be in those places, or they may be yet to come upon us; either way, a Jerusalem awaits us at some point in our lives, and time in the wilderness equips us for it. Time in the wilderness where we know that we're not alone for, like Jesus, we have the gift of the Spirit to come alongside us, providing comfort and support.

So, it is the strength of the Spirit and their love for Jesus that will enable the disciples to do as he commands: *'If you love me, you will obey what I command'* says Jesus. And these commands, what are they? Essentially they are the commands of love that Jesus speaks of in the chapter before: To serve each other, to be compassionate, to live in communion with one another, not to judge or condemn but to forgive, to love enemies, to live the beatitudes, to wash each other's feet. The command of Jesus is that we love one another as he loves us. This is *his* way, the *way* to God. However, Jesus knew his disciples well. He knew their strengths and he knew their weaknesses. He'd heard their petty squabbles and knew they didn't always find it easy to love each other. So, it's understandable that, in giving them the Spirit, the 'paraclete', he gives them a new strength to do the works he has planned for them. To do those things that, without the Spirit, they would be unable to do on their own.

And so it is with us too. The Spirit gives us a *new* strength and a *new* love to do the works of God, to do all those things that we seem unable to do by ourselves, by the strength of our own willpower: to love certain people, to forgive those who cause harm and upset to us, to become the friends of those who are different, to be open to those who have a different vision and way of doing things. A Spirit that can help us to continue the work of Jesus, not great miracles, but acts of simple kindness, and goodness, and compassion. Things which give people life, and lead them to trust in themselves and in God.

And there are benefits for us too. When we do practical, caring, loving things, and see the consequences – both for others and for ourselves – we find ourselves drawn closer to the heart of God. So, this week, let's all of us ask Jesus to help us always to show love, and to fill us again and again with the Spirit of truth, that comes alongside us, and promises never to leave us. Let each one of us be the one who says, *'Here I am Lord. Use me.'* Amen.