

Another Comforter

A Sermon Preached at Saint Albans Church

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Today's gospel passage comes from what is described by biblical scholars as "the Farewell Discourse." It takes place during the Last Supper, when Jesus is gathered with his disciples for one final time before his crucifixion and resurrection. In fact, the Last Supper takes up almost half the entire gospel of St. John, and is the place where Jesus more fully explain to his disciples who he was and what he came to do.

The Farewell Discourse forms part of the Last Supper conversation and consists of at least four parts. We saw the first part of the Farewell Discourse last week, when Jesus told his disciples that he was about to leave them:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14.1-3)

This news came as something of a shock to Jesus's hearers, for it is clear that they had long held other ideas about his Messiahship. As you probably know, many of Jesus' disciples believed in a Messiah who would come to defeat the Romans who then occupied Israel and rebuild the Davidic kingdom. Jesus, of course, had dropped hints earlier about his true mission, but the bold assertion that he was going away and leaving them behind left the apostles in some turmoil.

Jesus tries to allay their initial fears by telling them that he goes to a place "where there are many mansions," a place, in other words, that is prepared for each and every single one of us. He comforts his disciples by telling them that they will eventually be reunited with him in heaven.

Still, they understand that there is going to be a delay between his imminent departure and their ultimate reunion with him. They understand, in other words, that they will be left on earth whilst he will return to the father. And that is what terrifies them.

So it is that Jesus attempts to comfort his disciples by letting them know that his physical departure from the earth would not leave them completely adrift. Hence today's passage:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come

to you. (John 14.15-18).

On the face of it, that's a comforting thought. While Jesus is leaving this earth, he is going to send us an "Helper" or "Comforter" to be with us for ever. In the Greek, this Helper is described as "Parakleton", for which a better translation may be "advocate" or "counsellor."

I thought about those different translations and one might suggest that the latter are more accurate reflections of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is because if one looks carefully, Jesus' message is not one of complete comfort, at least on the surface. He is not saying, in other words, "don't worry. Just stand by and I'll be back soon." On the contrary, the promise of the Spirit is not without strings. It comes after a rather forceful assertion which is this: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." That's a rather tall order. After all, both his disciples listening around that table, and we here listening through the Gospels today, understand very well how difficult it is to keep his commandments. Later in the passage, Jesus makes an even more startling proclamation saying, that "if anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Is Jesus suggesting here that God only loves us if we keep his commandments? If so, we are doomed, for we know, as Paul says, that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) None of us seems to keep the commandments sufficiently to earn God's love. Consequently, what can Jesus mean? It is as if his resurrection on Easter had not changed a thing. We seem still to be obligated to fulfill God's law, and we are powerless to do what the law of God commands. Have we gotten it all wrong? Does God really love only those who earn his love?

The answer to that question is clearly, "No." God's love is not for sale, and the Reformers were not mistaken in their understanding of the principle of justification by grace through faith. Instead, what Jesus was telling his apostles was that with his earthly departure, the focus of their energies must change. Until this moment, their lives were centred around his physical presence. They trudged along behind him, allowing him to lead them where he would. He spoke to them directly, clearly, and confidently.

With his departure, however, their focus had to change. Rather than merely being part of the audience, they were called upon to become players. No longer were they to be listeners; they were, instead, to become preachers. And one way in which they were to do that was by being actual doers of the word, and not merely hearers only. They were to preach God's love by demonstrating his love in action.

John Calvin made this point in his Commentary on John:

The love with which the disciples loved Christ was true and sincere, and yet there was some superstition mixed with it, as is frequently the case with ourselves; for it was very foolish in them to wish to keep him in the world. To correct this fault, he bids them direct their love to another end; and that is, to employ themselves in

keeping the commandments which he had given them. This is undoubtedly a useful doctrine, for of those who think that they love Christ, there are very few who honor him as they ought to do; but, on the contrary, after having performed small and trivial services, they give themselves no farther concern. The true love of Christ, on the other hand, is regulated by the observation of his doctrine as the only rule.

Jesus, of course, knew that what he was asking is difficult for human beings. He knows that we are frail and wont to wander from the paths of righteousness. He knew that his followers would always need a God until he returned, and that would be the Spirit's role. Matthew Henry put it this way:

When Christ was with them he spoke for them as there was occasion; but now that he is leaving them they shall not be run down, the Spirit of the Father shall speak in them. And the cause cannot miscarry that is pleaded by such an advocate. You shall have another master or teacher, another exhorter. While they had Christ with them he excited and exhorted them to their duty; but now that he is going he leaves one with them that shall do this as effectually, though silently.

The Spirit was, thus, to be the Paraclete, the advocate or counsellor. It was to be Christ's advocate with them and us. The Spirit pleads his cause to us, by teaching, guiding and even cajoling. At the same time the Spirit pleads our cause with the world, strengthening us, giving us the words to fight back and the courage to endure.

Matthew Henry thus calls Jesus's promise today "the great New-Testament promise." It is a promise as important to Jesus's disciples, both then and now, as the promise of the Messiah was to the Israel of the Old Testament. More importantly, the promise of today's Gospel passage shows the importance of our understanding of the Trinity. As Calvin reminds us, in the very first sentence of today's passage, Jesus calls the Spirit "another Comforter," that is to say, "a second Comforter." Why is this? It is because we receive different blessings from both. "The peculiar office of Christ was, to appease the wrath of God by atoning for the sins of the world, to redeem men from death, to procure righteousness and life; and the peculiar office of the Spirit is, to make us partakers not only of Christ himself, but of all his blessings."

Put another way, the meaning of today's Gospel is this: "I was given to you by the Father to be a Comforter, but only for a time; now, having discharged my office, I will pray to him to give another Comforter, who will not be for a short time, but will remain always with you."

Let us pray, therefore, that as that Comforter has come, may be always be willing to listen for his words and be guided accordingly.

Amen.