

Sermon for 8.00am Service Sunday 14 May 2023
John 14: 15-21 – *Hidden Truth?* (Rev Phil Wootton)

In our Gospel passage, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death. He is leaving them, and they will be bereft. They'll still have each other, of course, but all they'll feel is that emptiness – that gaping hole in the heart – bereavement, especially sudden and unexpected bereavement, brings. They will be lonely.

Loneliness is recognised as a severe problem in our own society. We hear from time-to-time shock reports claiming loneliness causes more deaths than more obviously medical conditions. I don't know how you'd measure it. One surprising truth that the research has thrown up is that the age group most afflicted is not the elderly as you'd think, but 18- to 24-year-olds. To me, this highlights the difference between loneliness and being alone. (I speak as someone who quite likes living on their own!) Younger people may have much greater expectations of being together and may feel the lack of company more intensely, whilst when you're older, perhaps, you become more accepting. In any case, Jesus says you do not need to be alone.

Jesus sometimes seems to speak in riddles: first you'll see me, then you won't; then you'll see me, but others won't. With hindsight, we can see he speaks of his death and resurrection; of his strange coming-and-going resurrection appearances; of the times he was seen by up to 500 of his followers at one time, but not by the wider world; and of his final ascension into heaven. Then, he will ask the Father to send 'another Counsellor, the Spirit of truth.' 'Truth' here is less about doctrinal orthodoxy than the more fundamental truth: 'I am with you. You are not alone.' The Spirit who is in and with Jesus and the Father is also in and with you. It's the fundamental message of the Bible – think in the Old Testament of people like Moses and Joshua quaking in their boots when given the most impossible tasks, and told 'Do not be afraid; I am with you.' Think of Jesus, born 'Immanuel, God is with us,' and his anointing with the Spirit as he rose from the waters of the Jordan river at his baptism. Think of what the apostles would do through the Book of Acts, empowered by the Spirit at Pentecost. 'I am with you' banishes loneliness and fear.

Jesus called the Spirit the Counsellor. (Other translations say Advocate or Paraclete.) One of the problems of loneliness is that it leaves you powerless and voiceless, losing your sense of agency and ability to act. The Counsellor is someone who'll speak for you and stick up for you, and stay by your side; with whom you're not on your own. The Counsellor will be with you for ever. 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' asked St Paul. 'For nothing can separate us from the love of God.'

The often hidden but surprising truth, that we are not alone, is certainly to be enjoyed, but having received it, we are called to act on it too. The truth is, in this world of loneliness, many people are not going to recognise the inner presence of God saying 'I am with you,' unless that presence is fleshed out by other human beings.

In other words, it's for us, the church (the body of Christ on earth) to be there with one another and for one another, acting as Christ's presence in the world. That can be just having a cup of tea and a chat. (Never under-estimate the value of tea and chat!)

But it goes much further and wider, and it strikes me that Christian Aid Week can be like the proof of the pudding. It's a challenge and opportunity to make a statement that we are with and for others across the world. Through Christian Aid and its partners, we affirm others in what they do. There's a delightful video on the website telling about bread-making in Malawi out of pigeon peas. Christian Aid and its partners affirm and equip women of Malawi in an activity that transforms lives. If we can support through generous giving, we begin to treat the needs of others as our own. Christian Aid's work of advocacy is about speaking up for those marginalised by the economic forces of the world economy, or suffering most directly the effects of climate change.

Jesus says, 'Although you will not see me, I am there with you. And the Holy Spirit will be your Advocate, standing by you for ever.' May the truth no longer be hidden: we are not alone.