

"I am ... going away, but coming back"

Sunday 9th May 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Revelation 21:10 & 22-22:5

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

Wouldn't it be simple if we could just show people God?

Jesus' disciples thought so. Philip said to Jesus:

"Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." (John 14:8)

... and Jesus' response to Philip?:

*"Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?
Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."* (John 14:9)

Jesus went on to explain that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, and that the words he was speaking were the Father's words. You can't separate out Jesus from God, any more than you can separate out the Holy Spirit from Jesus or the Father.

Muslims mistakenly accuse Christians of worshipping three gods, which is not true. The Holy Trinity is both an amazing truth which is fundamental to our understanding of God as he has revealed himself. It is also a great mystery which we cannot fully understand ... Father, Son and Holy Spirit are inextricably linked each one a manifestation of the other ... three persons, but only one God.

So it was that Jesus was able to send his disciples out on the Great Commission, tasked with making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them in turn to live in obedience to his commands. They were sent out to do an impossible task, except for this promise of Jesus (Matthew 28:20):

"I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

How could he be with them, since he was ascending to the Father in heaven? ... because after he had left them, the Holy Spirit would come to be with them, and even *in* them ... and that just as he was in the Father and the Father in him, so they were in him, and he in them. It is a promise which holds for all Christians for all time, us included.

The Christian life isn't just concerned with knowing about God, or even with getting to know God a bit better ... it is about learning to live in intimate relationship with God through Jesus, infused with the presence of the Holy Spirit, so that God lives within us, and our lives are bound up with his life. The Christian life is about knowing that Jesus is indeed with us, to the very end.

But we all know from our own experience that sometimes God seems far away ... and sometimes we know that we have pulled away from God and are not living as close to him as we should. Given the things that Jesus said, how can that be?

The truth is that we live in a world in transition, in which the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. What has begun through Jesus' first coming is still to find its completion when Jesus comes again, as he has promised he will. In the meantime, we are called as disciples of the Lord Jesus to work for the advance of the coming of the Kingdom, while recognising that all is not yet as it shall be ... including ourselves.

We see the outworking of this every day of our lives. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus won the victory over sin and disease and death ... Satan was defeated, and Jesus rose from the grave in victory. And yet, people still reject Jesus and fall into sin ... faithful Christian people still suffer from terrible diseases, and death still gets us all in the end ...

... except, of course, that death is not the end ... and God has a bright future for all who will believe in him and put their trust in him.

In our passage from John 14, then, Jesus is speaking to his disciples about love and obedience, and the promises of God. Even here Jesus says:

"These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me." (v24)

Jesus is telling them that love and obedience go hand in hand.

That isn't always true, of course. In some relationships ... especially abusive ones ... obedience is based on anything but love ... and in our rights-orientated, me-first world, we have come to see obedience as something to be feared or avoided. We don't think we should have to be obedient to anyone, because obedience is the opposite of freedom.

Not so with God. We obey God not out of fear but out of love, because God's perfect love draws us to himself and makes us want to live in obedience to his will. If we love him, we want to please him ... and we please him by living in accordance with his commands, knowing that his commands are good for us.

Once we understand and trust that our Lord's teaching comes from a heart that wants to bless us and make us prosper, then it is not so hard to live obedient lives.

Even the Ten Commandments, that are so often misrepresented as a list of killjoy restrictions on human freedom ...

DO NOT steal ... DO NOT commit adultery ... DO NOT tell lies

... are really designed to make us free. God warns us off the things which destroy relationships and lead to human sorrow, if only we would listen.

God's commands give us boundaries for human relationships in order that we can live in peace with one-another and with God, and set a pattern for our relationship with God so that we are not easily led astray into false religion or the worship of wealth or possessions.

So, if we love him, we will obey his teaching ... and God himself will make his home with us. This new level of deeper intimacy with God which we can have through putting our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, is a foretaste of the greater glory which we will experience at the end of the age, when finally we see him face to face.

The disciples did not want to hear about Jesus going away. After three years on the road

with him, they could hardly bear to imagine life without him as their constant companion.

Hard as it was, they would have to come to accept that Jesus would leave them *twice* ... once when he was taken away to die on the cross, and the second time when he ascended to his Father forty days after the resurrection ... and which we commemorate on Thursday of this coming week. But he would not leave them alone to fend for themselves.

The promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection ... and we will not pre-empt out thinking about that too much now. But Jesus explained to them that the task of the Holy Spirit – the Counsellor – would be to remind them of all that he had taught them, and to continue to reveal God's truth to them ... to teach them all things.

So it was that Jesus said to them (John 14:27):

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

They had no reason to fear, because through the Holy Spirit they would receive the power to fulfil God's plan, expressed through the words of the Psalmist (Psalm 67:2):

"... that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all the nations"

This was a task which was far beyond their human capacity to fulfil, but enabled by God and empowered by the Spirit, these anxious and fearful men would be able to turn the world upside down as they proclaimed the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ all over the known world.

Within a few short years, there would be Christians in every part of the Roman Empire.

We, too, are commissioned to the same task ... and it is still far beyond our human capacity ... except that what was true for them remains true for us (Matthew 28:20):

"I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

... so that twenty centuries later, there are Christians in almost every part of the world, and the task of the Great Commission continues until Jesus returns in glory.

Jesus says to us, as he said to them (John 14:27):

"Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

But do we allow our hearts to be troubled? And are we sometimes afraid?

Troubles and fears often come through not allowing ourselves to fully trust in Jesus and his word.

- If he has promised to be with us, to the very end of the age, then what have we to fear?
- If he has given us his Holy Spirit to enable and guide us, then why are we so often troubled ... not only about present problems, but what will happen to us in the future?

I guess the truth is that we have not yet fully learned to trust God and take him at his word.

Sometimes we hold back because we feel unworthy of God's love, or we feel that somehow we have to earn his favour before he will really bless us. But God's love is unconditional ... it is there for all who will receive him ... and as we learn to trust him more, little by little we come to see that he is faithful, and will never let us down.

***To illustrate the point ... can I ask you to turn to someone sitting near you, and share with them some way, however great or trivial, that God has shown you his faithfulness?
Perhaps get a few to share with all?***

Jesus says to each one of us this morning (John 14:27):

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

Part of what sustained the early Christians through the difficult times through which many of them lived was their sure hope of the future which Jesus promised them ... a hope based on his faithfulness as they had already experienced it. This leads us on to our passage in Revelation, and the glorious hope which we share with those first disciples.

Revelation is not an easy book, and needs to be read with care. It is full of complex imagery and visions, and was not written to be interpreted literally. It is an attempt in human language to describe the indescribable.

That does not mean we should not take Revelation seriously, though. It is part of the revealed word of God, and was written for our encouragement ... and the latter part describes in vivid images the future which God has in store for those who love him.

Verse 10 of Revelation 22 is the second time in the chapter that John tells us he was shown the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, and the following verses describe what he sees on a massive scale, with precious stones and pure gold and crystal. You get the idea of what he was trying to convey when he writes:

"The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass."

What does that look like? John is trying to describe the indescribable.

Look at verse 22:

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God almighty and the lamb are its temple."

'The Lamb', of course, is a reference to Jesus ... 'the lamb who was slain' in the prophet Isaiah, and in the earlier chapters of Revelation.

That there is no temple in the city is hugely significant. The Jews set enormous store by the temple, because for them it was the place where God came to dwell among his people ... it was where they could meet with him, albeit with fear and trembling, and only the Chief Priests allowed to go behind the curtain to enter into the holiest place just once a year.

In the New Jerusalem, God will no longer hide behind the curtain; for fear of destroying

the people by his sheer magnificence ... he will live in intimate communion with them. The New Jerusalem needs no temple, because God and the Lamb ARE its temple ... not literally, as a building, of course, but in the sense that they are there among the people all the time, and they can see them face to face. Jesus is coming back!

Notice, too, that the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth, which has been made new. The earth is not just our temporary home until we go to be with God. Far from the common view that the final destiny of believers is to go to live with God in heaven, looking down on the earth ... Revelation teaches that God will make all things new, and that he will come to live among us on the earth.

Perhaps this has something to say to us about our care for the environment of the planet?

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that his leaving was not something to be feared or regretted, but a strategic part of God's plan for them and for the world.

- He left them to die on the cross at Calvary so that he could win the victory over sin, death and the devil, and so bring us salvation.
- He left them to ascend to his Father so that the Holy Spirit could come, and be present with all believers all the time, in a way in which he could not do as a man limited by space and time.

But Jesus will be coming back ... that is his promise.

The images which John gives us paint a picture of the wonderful life we will share in the New Jerusalem:

- Where the glory of God will be our light.
- Where the gates will be open in permanent welcome for all.
- Where there will be nothing evil or impure.
- Where every need will be met, every hunger satisfied and every thirst quenched.
- Where all will be healed, and there will be no more sorrow or crying or pain or fear.
- Where we will reign with him forever!

Jesus will return at the end of the age to gather to himself all those who are his disciples ... and he will return in all his glory to finally establish his kingdom – the New Jerusalem which will last forever, and in which he will live among us.

This is his promise. This is our future.

Meanwhile, God calls us, and equips us by his Holy Spirit, and gives us his peace.

So ... considering God's faithfulness ... God's promise ... and God's commands ...

... what is God calling you to do, and how is God calling you to live, in order to be ready for all that he has in store for you?