

Easter 6 Sunday May 17th 2020

The Promise of the Spirit

Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing

Lectionary Gospel Reading John 14: 15-21 (NRSV)

15 'If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever and ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you. They who have my commandments and who keep them are those that love me; and those that love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them'

There has been a proliferation of mental health apps. Within minutes one can download myriads that claim to incorporate proven techniques to address anything from anxiety, eating disorder, PTSD, depression and more. Less than 2% have peer reviewed research to support their claim. Most of them are used in isolation, but most people in need of help need to engage with a person who can offer help without judgement.

During this period of lockdown and particularly for those who live alone we know that presence matters. Many of us resort to using our i-phones, their i-pads and computers to see our friends but some do not have that luxury. Many of us long to get out to meet our families and friends again-not two metres apart - but just to give them a hug. This invisible virus makes us afraid for we know the outcome of a severe infection.

But there is an invisible presence that we can risk knowing. We do not need an app to tell us when this is near for the presence is that Advocate/Comforter (KJV)/Counsellor (NIV) that Jesus promised his disciples. In this reading, Jesus promises that even when he is gone, the disciples will not be orphans, the Spirit of God himself will be with them and with all who love him. Those disciples did not really understand Jesus but they did not want him to go away so Jesus is promising a permanent bridge between himself/God and them. Many people in Swaledale and in other places have known what it was like to have a vital bridge between two communities washed away in the floods of last year. Folk had to go the long

way round to get to the other side of the river. The bridge Jesus promised will never be swept away even though he is no longer visible.

When Jesus said 'I will not leave you orphaned' the words must have resonated with those disciples as they do with us and speak directly to some of our greatest fears—abandonment and isolation, loneliness and vulnerability. Anyone who has ever loved and lost—a spouse, a child, a friend, security, hope knows the orphan's questions. We were never destined or intended to be self sufficient. The words remind us that we do not walk alone. We were created to love and be loved, to live in a relationship as persons giving of ourselves to others even in lockdown. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said 'The most important thing that I have ever done is to follow Jesus. Jesus has walked along side me. I want everyone to hear his call and find his transforming love'.

'I will not leave you orphaned'—that is the promise. How strange that would have sounded to the disciples—leaving and coming; Presence and Absence—held in tension—not mutually exclusive. In these difficult days, presence matters. As Rev. Dr. Andrew Stobbart, of Wesley College Cambridge, says in his recent article in the Methodist Recorder, the good news of Easter is not the empty tomb but the risen Christ, and the resurrection story is about presence. Our Saviour is available, present and not a figment of the imagination. Not some old app that we can use when we are feeling low but present 100% of the time. He just asks us to love him and others as he loved. Those are his only commands. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, with its storms, death, separation, ---we never have and never will be orphaned by God. That bridge will never be swept away. This invisible app has been peer reviewed by millions over the last 2000 years and has not been found wanting. Perhaps in this time we can discover anew what is real and discover that **presence** as we communicate with God and with each other in love even at this time from a distance. This is the challenge for us in the Gospel for today

And if you really do want to download an app at this time why not download the prayer app for 'Thy Kingdom Come' the global ecumenical prayer initiative promoted by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 2016 and in which the Methodist church has become a partner. The aim is for Christians to pray together, between Ascension day and Pentecost—just simply to pray in whatever way you want, for the empowering of the Holy Spirit that you might become an effective witness for our God. Although somewhat distant this year we can still pray 'Thy Kingdom Come', not only in our hearts but for those who so desperately need a different world. As Wendy says in her Christian Aid reflection for the 75th anniversary of Christian Aid, let us reach out in love and giving for those who are so disadvantaged in this world. It's the least we can do.

And so the yearning strong
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace,
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

STF 372 *Bianco da Siena (d.1443)*

Janet Anderson

A Prayer by Gabriel Gidi

God our father, we approach your throne of glory with reverence.

At this time of uncertainty and fear, we pray for your calming presence.

We pray for the Holy Spirit – the advocate, who will always be with us;
the spirit of truth to be with us today.

We pray for all who are working to mitigate this pandemic.

We pray especially for the school staff, the NHS staff and all those working on the frontline.

We trust in your promises Lord Jesus Christ.

You promised not to leave us as orphans; to give us your comforter in our times of need;

Come Holy Spirit and comfort us.

We pray that your love engulfs us in these scary and confusing times.

Holy Spirit

Be with us.

Holy Spirit

Sustain us.

Holy Spirit

Protect us.

We pray and sing:

“Spirit of God
Breathe on Your church
Pour out Your presence
Speak through Your word
We pray in every nation, Christ be known
Our hope and salvation, Christ alone.” **Amen.**

The words of this prayer are adapted from:

John 14: 15 - 21

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