

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH 6 OF EASTER YEAR C 26 MAY 2019

We are well into the season of Easter. The gospels tell us Jesus appeared on a number of occasions to his followers. Then on his last appearance he returned to God the Father's presence, ascended into heaven as we say.

Were the disciples left on their own? No. In today's gospel reading we hear Jesus speaking the night before he was crucified. He says that he and his Father will come and make their home with those who love him and keep his word. How can this happen? It will happen through the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' followers. Jesus is no longer present in bodily form, but he is spiritually present. The church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost, and that's a fortnight from today.

If you think about it, it's an amazing claim: that God is present in our lives, in the routine things as well as the big things. He is with us as we have breakfast, go to school or work, the post office or the playgroup. He's with us not just when we go to church, though he is with us at church in a special way. And by church I don't necessarily mean the building: church is wherever a few Christians meet: maybe in the building, but also at a study group, or at family fun in the Parish Room after school, or at one of the organisations, or at any other church event.

Some of us have been involved with church for a very long time. The challenge for us is to keep on listening to the Holy Spirit who, as Jesus says, will teach us everything and remind us of what Jesus said. In a changing world the Holy Spirit continues to guide us as we find the right way to hear God's words and keep them as Jesus commands us.

How can we listen to the Holy Spirit? We can look inwards. What is the Spirit saying in our hearts? Not that we can presume to have messages from God on tap without any effort or preparation on our part. But if we have been sincerely trying to grow as disciples, have tried to be faithful servants, we should become more and more attuned to the Spirit. This is sanctification, growing in holiness. What do we discern? What is our conscience telling us? In today's reading from *Acts* Paul receives guidance in a dream, but 2,000 years ago that was held to be a normal way for God to communicate, and Paul had been committed to the gospel for quite some time. He was prepared; he was open to the Spirit's prompting.

However, we all know the problems that people convinced they've had a message from God can cause in a church or any other group. The second consideration in listening to the Spirit is looking outwards. Sorry I'm mixing up the two senses of listening and looking, but I hope you get my meaning. By looking outwards I mean listening to the wisdom of other people. There's a good example of that in last week's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, where a church council was held in Jerusalem to hear from S. Peter about baptising Gentiles into the church without insisting they adopt the Jewish law. His actions had been opposed by some, but the outcome of the council was a sensible foundation for the spread of the gospel beyond its Jewish origins.

We should also look backwards, to our Christian inheritance. We have the scriptures – a record of God reaching out to mankind, and mankind's response, especially to the salvation brought by Christ, God incarnate. We have the insight of the church through the ages in the creeds, in other Christian writings, in hymns and poetry, and in the lives of other Christians, especially those we recognise as saints.

And finally we can look forwards, confident that the Holy Spirit will lead us into the future. Jesus' words to his disciples in today's gospel look to the future. He speaks probably around the table where he and his disciples have eaten the meal we call the last supper. He tells them he is leaving them – we know that was through the crucifixion – but that would not be a defeat. It would be a completion, a going to the Father, and would enable a Christian community to be formed, united in love, participating in the Spirit, to be Jesus' continuing presence in this world. We are part of this community, and receive the peace Jesus promised to his disciples: not the absence of struggles, but the security that we are not on our own: God has made his home with us.