

## Easter 6 Year A 2020

When I sent the first of these 'lock down' sermons to the congregation at St John's, Arpafeelie – the one for Lent 3 – I didn't think, and I don't think any of us thought, that I would still be doing this on the sixth Sunday of Easter, and with no-end in sight! I have to confess that it is becoming more and more difficult to 'write a sermon', rather than 'prepare a lecture', because sermons should be inter-active, they are a shared experience. I need to speak, you need to listen, and I need to feel, as I go one, your reaction to what you hear; I need to hear your unspoken reaction, the nodding of heads, the shaking of heads, the smiles and the frowns, the scowling or quizzical looks - that is when I go *off piste* and say things I haven't written down, those things that can never be recovered because they happen in the instance – and they are probably the most important things. But we are where we are – and where we are likely to be for quite a long time yet. Easter 6, Ascension Day, Easter 7, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday. Will we be able to gather on Trinity Sunday? I doubt it. And then we will be in Ordinary Time, all those green 'Sundays after Trinity'.

Except, of course, there is nothing Ordinary about this time. 'Stay at home' (if you are lucky enough not to live in England), schools closed, buses empty, and for some the painful absence of those they love. Imagine the family of a care worker who decides that she (it could be a he but generally it is a she) who

decides that she has to stay at the Home where she works, because she is frightened of taking the virus home to her young family, leaving it (or catching it) on the bus, passing it on to the lady in the local shop – despite her reassurance that 'daddy will be here for you' the children are going to feel anxious and bereft. It simply won't be the same without the one they are used to, and does daddy know .....? But as time goes on, the children will discover that daddy can ..... even if he doesn't do it quite like mummy.

Jesus has tried to prepare his disciples for the reality of life without him, for the inevitability of his death, the effect that that will have on them. They have heard his words, but have not understood – perhaps they didn't want to understand because they were in denial about this happening. Here in the Upper Room they are upset, bewildered, puzzled – and still in denial. What will happen to him? What will happen to them? The disciples need what we all need at this moment – a ladleful of hope.

And here it comes, served with great generosity – 'I will not leave you orphaned/comfortless/bereft' – when he has gone 'to the Father' they will receive a counsellor/helper/advocate (the Greek word Paraclete has many nuanced meanings including 'someone to stand beside your side', a faithful companion who will guide, sustain, comfort, prompt. And this Counsellor – this other advocate (Jesus himself being the first one) this other

advocate will remind them of Jesus' love for them, of his teaching, of what he did, of who he was, so that they will have the strength and courage to do what he did, to be, as best they could, what he had been, what he was, what he is. They will be able to give an account of the hope that is in them. Jesus calls the Advocate the Spirit of Truth. At his trial Pilate will ask 'What is truth?' and Jesus will remain silent; he doesn't need to reply. He doesn't need to; just look Jesus in the eye, Pilate – and look at truth. 'I am the truth' he has told his disciples. If you know Jesus, you know what truth is, you know what life is and you know the way to that fullness of life which Jesus offers – even if, at this moment in time, for so many people, this is so hard to hang on to. My best friend's husband has just been diagnosed with Covid19 and offered only palliative care. How do you cope with that? Hear the words of Jesus – I will send you a Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. That Spirit will sustain us as we work our way through this pandemic, through the grief and the anger, through the financial worries, through our isolation and loneliness and we will see and recognise that spirit at work in hospital staff, care workers, key workers, neighbours, friends and family.

If our hearts are open, ready to receive him, the spirit can come – not gate-crashing in, but gently entering where he is invited, and we will be able to keep the final commandment of Jesus – love one another; not just our family, friends, neighbours, but those we find hard to love – 'them' not 'us' – because in Christ

there is no them and us – all are welcome, and all should be welcomed.

The promise of Jesus was/is 'I am coming to you.' Our belief that Jesus keeps his promises is the ladleful of hope we receive today, and every day.

In his poem '*Shadows*' D H Lawrence writes

*And if tonight my soul may find her peace  
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,  
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower  
then I have been dipped again in God, and new created.*

*I am in the hands of the unknown God . . .  
to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.*

Dipped again in God, dipped into the ladleful of hope he offers us, if only we will drink from it.

