

Sixth Sunday of Easter
17 May 2020

Jesus's Inseparable Companion



Gospel *John 14.15-21*

At the end of the Last Supper, just before leaving for Gethsemene

Jesus said to his disciples ‘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 for 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 with 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 keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Homily

Time and again in media coverage of the effects of the pandemic, we are being told stories, and shown images, of people who are discovering afresh what and who it is that they *really* love. While we were all housebound the answers were for most people relatively simple to find. As we begin to increase more contact with other people it is becoming more difficult and complicated to decide, who matters most? What do I really love? Perhaps more people will discover what some people on the front line have known for months now: that we love our nearest and dearest, and we love our freedom, but deeper down we love our security, we cling to the things that give us comfort in suffering and cover in weakness. We want to be utterly safe, safe from strangers, safe from sudden change.

Time and again the Christian life also demands that we ask ourselves what and who we really love. Where do we find security and confidence? How shall we grow beyond our slavery to our security, or suffering, or weakness? And in all of it we hear the risen Christ saying (as he said to the apostle Simon-Peter), ‘Do you love *me*?’ Jesus *confronts* our rather unstable, changeable, confused, and sometimes enslaving loves, and asks us to look at ourselves a bit harder and deeper and longer. Do we *really* love him? Do we trust his *promise* that we can be freed from the misplaced loves that corrupt or destroy us? and the loves that set us at enmity with each other?

In today's Gospel passage, immediately following the passage read last Sunday (and still in the setting of the Last Supper) Jesus speaks of love: how it is known and proved, and what it needs in order to become stable, and faithful, and even liberating. 'If you love me – if!', he says, 'you will keep my commandments.' In other words, if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching, 'and I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, to be with you for ever' (*Jn* 14:15-16). Here the praying heart of Jesus is revealed to us, the heart of a son, the heart of a brother, the heart of a man who within hours would freely accept a rigged trial and a brutal death to reveal the heart of an eternal father.

So we must ask ourselves what it means to love God, to love Jesus, because two great promises ride on it. First, Jesus's promise of prayer for us (vv.16 and 26), and second, the Father's promise of the 'other Comforter' (*Acts* 1.4). The answer isn't easy; but it is *necessary* to understand what love Jesus is looking for. Even setting aside the misplaced loves that can so easily enslave us, is it *really* right to say we love God in the same way as we love another person, and desire their company and embrace? Can we love God, he who is invisible, as we might love a parent, a spouse, a mentor, or a child?

By listening carefully to the word of God, we learn that human love towards God cannot be reduced to desire, and to consoling embrace. God is loved and known *differently*. Our love for God comes instead from *listening* to God, absorbing the *will* of God, and at the same time *believing and obeying* it. Therefore loving Jesus cannot mean making him the focus of *our desires*, not least because there is a very great risk that we shall love an idol, the Jesus of our projections, our preferences, and our prejudices.

True and authentic love for Jesus is always a matter of *doing* what he commands and wills. When a Christian replaces with his *own* impulse and desire the *will* of the Lord (understood from the *word* of the Lord) then he does *not* love Jesus. But when a Christian lives her life with 'the mind that was in Christ Jesus' (*Phil* 2.5), as he taught throughout the gospels, then we can know that she *does* love Jesus.

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer crystallized this discernment in a pithy observation in his little 1937 book *The Cost of Discipleship*: 'only he who *believes* is obedient, and only he who is *obedient* believes'. The first part is easy enough to agree with. The second leaves us scratching our heads. But that is *exactly* what John says in his gospel beginning as far back as the conversation with Nicodemus: 'Those who *do* the truth come to the light, so that it can be seen that what they have *done* has been done in God' (3.21). And Jesus at the Last Supper himself says in terms, 'Anyone who doesn't keep my commands, doesn't love me' (v.24).

Desire is not enough; and those among us who separate love and obedience will find it hard to understand when Jesus says, 'You are my friends, *if you do* what I command you' (*Jn* 15:14). Doing the truth, will bring us to the light. Doing what God wants, in a life joyfully and freely laid down for others, is to love him not *because* he loves us; but *in the same way as* he loves us. But that's not easy or straightforward is it?

An old friend of mine, Donald Nicholl, wrote these words in his famous little book *Holiness* (1981):

'So long as our lives are in our own hands we will likely never give up the very things we need above all to give up if we are to be changed, whether that thing is the love of money, our house, our good opinion of ourselves, our good name, our health, or our very life. What we do not want to give up is *precisely* the thing that is *necessary* for us to give up if we are to grow up.'
(p.133)

Now we can see *why* Jesus promises 'another Paraclete'! We need him. This Greek term, *parakletos*, is reserved in the New Testament, on the one hand for Jesus himself, who, according to the First Letter of St John, is 'the Paraclete (the advocate) that we have with the Father' (*I Jn* 2.1); and, on the other for 'the *other* Paraclete' in our gospel passage (v.16), the Holy Spirit: that is, the person whom St Basil the Great calls Jesus's 'inseparable companion' (*Treatise on the Holy Spirit*, 16.39; *cf* 19.49; and Gregory Nazianzen *Orations*, 31.29). In him the Christian in need finds a friend indeed. Until the Lord returns, the Holy Spirit helps us to live in God's presence and reminds us of the Lord's teaching, so that freed from anxiety and fear, bearing in our hearts the peace which Jesus left us, the like of which the world cannot give (see *Jn* 14:26-27), we may obey his teaching.

Jesus says, 'I am the Truth'; and he gives us the the Spirit of truth (v.17) to support us and help us to do what God entrusts to us. Jesus may no longer be on earth beside us, but his 'inseparable companion' remains with us, and in us; and he teaches us how to love, how to serve, and how to die – for God and for those who are with us in the world.

Prayer

God our Father, before your Son was glorified he promised to send upon his disciples and on us another advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with us: grant that we, whom he has not left as orphans in this world, may confidently abide always in his Spirit, and be found obedient to his word, loving as he loves us. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thank you for reading. I hope it has been encouraging and helpful.

May God almighty keep us in his protection and peace. Amen.



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