Sixth Sunday of Easter – 25 May 2025

Message – Deceptively simple, God is with us and in us

Creator, Redeemer, Giver of New Life, draw us close to you. **Amen.**

As last week, we have a short passage from John's gospel with a lot packed into it. This time it is Jesus's response to the last of four questions asked by the disciples in response to Jesus's announcement in last week's passage that he was about to leave them. The disciples are far more concerned about this announcement than the new commandment they have been given, to love one another.

Peter asked, *'Lord where are you going?'* Thomas asked, *'Lord… How can we know the way?'* Philip demanded, *'Lord, show us the Father.'* Judas (not Iscariot) asked, *'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?'*

While the disciples are concerned about Jesus's departure, Jesus answers keep returning to the same themes, the heart of the gospel, equipping them for the future and helping them understand why and how he is going to be glorified. They don't get it; their understanding will come later with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples still did not understand the nature of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is inaugurating. The disciples were still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom. If it had taken the great force of the Roman army to create Pax Romana, they,

along with most Jews, were expecting an even greater power to bring God's Kingdom, Pax Dei, the Peace of God.

We know this is not the nature of Kingdom Christ came to bring. The Kingdom of God is found in the followers of Christ individually and collectively. It is found in those who follow Christ's words and who love Christ, which means being patient, kind, humble, and forgiving, and bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things for the sake of Christ. *(c.f. 1 Corinthians 13.4-7)* We are a work in progress.

And, as I previewed last week, Christ then promises that we will not be left to do this alone. The Holy Spirit guides us, the Advocate, Comforter, Helper, Intercessor, Strengthener, Counsellor, we struggle to translate the Greek. This is God with us, it should come as no surprise that we struggle to find the right words.

There are other parts of this passage that are hard to interpret too. Within it we have the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This passage was a key passage in the Arian controversy, the claim that Jesus was not fully God as he is here subordinate to God the Father. However, we must always take the scriptures as a whole and hold the tension of equality and subordination.

Historians suspect that most Christians didn't understand what was being argued over at the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. The development of the Niceno-Constantinople Creed commonly called the Nicene Creed, was an attempt to clarify the nature of Christ and the

relationship between the first two persons of the Trinity:

> *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,*
> *the only Son of God,*
> *eternally begotten of the Father,*
> *God from God, Light from Light,*
> *true God from true God,*
> *begotten, not made,*
> *of one being with the Father.*

I often wonder how much difference the doctrine of the Trinity makes to our faith. What is it we lose if we do not believe in the Trinity? It is interesting that many of those who primarily attend Church for the major festival seem to have a stronger attachment to this ecumenical creed than I do. I admit, there is something beautiful about it. In the struggle to describe the nature of the relationship we touch upon the mystery of God. So, without the doctrine of the Trinity, the first thing we might lose is the sense of mystery that fills the pages of John's gospel.

John's gospel holds the tension of Christ being fully God and fully human. The answer to the previous question to Jesus, *'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'* declares the equality of the first two persons of the Trinity. The revelation in Christ carries far more significance if Christ is fully God than if Christ is in some way less than God.

In considering this idea, the shocking nature of the revelation becomes apparent. God has walked among us. God chose to wash the disciples' feet. God chose not to

resist the violence of those who were against the message of the Eternal Word, God suffered and died at the hands of those God had created. When seen in this light, the resurrection ceases to be unexpected. Nothing can contain God who is all powerful, even if God chose to be contained in human form to demonstrate what it means for us to love as God loves us. We remain creatures, God remains creator. The surprise is that we are promised that same resurrection, if we love God as God loves us.

If God will stoop to wash our feet and not even consider it stooping but rather a simple act of loving service, and we are walking in the way God has set before us, we should be eager to serve one another, to love one another as Jesus commanded at the start of this discourse. (Breathe!)

The full doctrine of the Trinity, God existing in three, co-equal, coeternal, consubstantial, divine persons, sharing essence, substance, and nature, yet distinct persons, a rather inadequate word that risks making our God too small, is also significant for how we see the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed affirms the equality of the Holy Spirit with the first two persons of the Trinity, worthy to be *'worshipped and glorified'*. We may feel that we would be better Christians if we had had the experiences of the disciples. This is to downplay the significance of the Holy Spirit being with each and every one of us.

Yes, Christ was present in physical form but that did not stop people being unable to believe in what he said and did,

in the radical new vision Christ gave of God's Kingdom here on earth. The leap of understanding that the first Christians had to make was huge. We, as the saying goes, stand of the shoulders of giants. And, we are not left to do that alone, the Holy Spirit helps us, who depending on which passage you draw on proceeds from the first two persons of the Trinity, or from the first through the second.

Given that scripture supports both options and the result either way is our receiving the Holy Spirit, it may seem hard to fathom how the Eastern and Western churches fell out over the addition of *'and the son'* to the Nicene Creed. Of course, in reality it was about much more than that. Historians think much of it was about the Western Church making the change unilaterally. Doctrinally, the Eastern church holds the tension of both proceeding from and through, as might be argued does the Western.

It is hard to recognise when division is necessary and when we are splitting hairs where we cannot even see the hair we are splitting and the difference is of no consequence. Sometimes, the things we fall out over are not actually the things, they are only a symbol of something else.

In this case either way, the equality of the Holy Spirit with the other persons of the Trinity puts us in a profoundly privileged position. We have the fullness of God with us: No wonder it is such a struggle to find a word for the advocate, the Holy Spirit. God is not remote from us. God has walked among us. God dwells with us today. As we love others, so we love God. May we all have a growing

awareness of God with us and God with others, God working in and through us all.