

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Date: 17 May 2015

Reading: 1 John 5: 13-21

John 15:18-27

Theme: Jesus promises the Spirit

This term we have been making our way through a gallery ... a series of pictures or portraits of Jesus trying to get a better view, a better understanding, a better take on who Jesus really is.

We have seen Jesus with Thomas, we've seen him on the Emmaus Road, we've seen him as the good shepherd, as the true vine (with Gary), as the one (with Sue) who says we are to love one another and the one, this morning, who promises the Spirit.

We are going to see as we begin to look at chapter 15 of John, that the context of the promise of the Spirit is surprising: the context of the promise of the Spirit is the love of the Father and the hate of the world. Love and hate together ... I think that's a bit surprising.

So, we're in chapter 15 of John and it's very interesting to see how John suddenly changes in v18 from all that has gone before in vv1-17 ... In vv1-17 we are in the garden, we are looking at the vine, and we are thinking about

branches remaining attached to the main stem of the vine, we are thinking about pruning and about bearing fruit, we're thinking about abiding in his love, about complete joy, about loving one another, about laying down our lives. These verses could not be more upbeat and positive.

Then in v18 all of a sudden we are talking about hate. So if in vv1-17 we are in the garden, from v18 onwards we are on the battle field. And that's where we begin this morning.

Jesus says:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. Because you do not belong to the world (but I have chosen you out of the world) therefore the world hates you. If they persecuted me they will persecute you.

We've not really had this before in the gallery. In the pictures we have looked at so far, we have always had positive images, positive pictures of Jesus and positive responses from those he interacts with. Here the mood has changed quite markedly. This is the flip side, the darker side, of the coin.

And it's quite hard to understand ... why would someone who is a teacher, healer, worker of miracles, calmer of seas and storms find himself so opposed and vilified and hated by people? Why would people react so badly to someone who was so apparently and so conspicuously good? Why would some people find Jesus such a threat?

The answer seems to be that he challenged their position and status in the scheme of things and made them feel very uncomfortable and very insecure. Anger is often a sign of our insecurity and our anxiety about things we are not able to control.

And attempts to shut him up (stop him teaching the crowds), slow him down (get him into arguments) and even put an end to his nonsense once and for all (put him to death) are all signs that the rulers and authorities found him a massive threat to them but also frighteningly popular with the people. And they really really didn't like that. And so they hated him and they persecuted him. They stood against all he stood for.

Some of this is about insecure personality types. Some of this is about change. Not everyone embraces change warmly and can't wait for the next innovation or new idea. Not everyone finds change an easy thing to welcome. Some of us like to know where we are and some of us enjoy the comfort of the familiar and the known and the safe.

The people who opposed Jesus, those who hated him and persecuted him, were worried about where his popularity and his preaching would all end. What place would they have in society or religious life if he became the new pin up boy?

In the UK it's hard for us sometimes to grasp this. Christians may be teased at school or at work maybe; or may be criticised in the press or in the courts for taking a particular line on something. But there are parts of the world where Christians today are putting their very lives on the line for what they believe and for a clear statement of intent to follow the one who was hated and persecuted first. We have read horrific reports of Christians being attacked and killed by the Islamic extremists of the IS.

Now we may feel that this is very far away from us in the comfort of semi-rural Berkshire. But here is a warning: even here in the UK there are signs of intolerance and aggression and confrontation over a clear and straightforwardly orthodox position on certain things, which may in time, prove to be just the thin end of the wedge.

The whole discussion and debate about Human Sexuality and Gay Marriage in certain conversations I have been involved in already, produces a most extraordinary reaction from those who want to re-write scripture and history. Emotions run exceedingly high on this issue and we have seen employees and whole businesses come under surprising pressure from the revisionists. The issue of free speech and of freedom of conscience to express a contrary view to the received wisdom of Parliament is a challenge to us all.

The C of E is to have a process of facilitated conversations to come to an understanding about all of this – but the intended or expected outcome of these conversations is far from clear.

There is a cost to following this man – the shepherd, the true vine, the one who is love and the one who calls his followers to love.

So this is the context (a context of love and hate – or what we might call the real world) in which Jesus promises the Spirit ... He says this: v26

“When the advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning”.

Just like the question about hatred and persecution, where we see the link between what happened to Jesus and what happens to his followers – *if the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before ... and if they persecuted me they will persecute you* – so here the Spirit will testify and followers of Jesus are to testify.

Now what does all this mean?

We have just celebrated Ascension Day, the day when Jesus' earthly physical ministry comes to an end. He will not be around any more as he had been previously, for thirty years in apparent obscurity, for three years of frantic

activity and energy and then for a few short weeks after his death and resurrection. In the future he will be present with his people by his Spirit. Sue will speak more of this next week.

But for today we must note that the Spirit is the Spirit of truth, he is the advocate (the one who speaks up and speaks out the truth of Jesus and the truths about Jesus).

And the promise of the Spirit is to say “you are not going to be able to do this on your own”. We can't do Christian faith on our own. We can't do Christian living on our own. We can't be all that God wants us to be on our own. So he sends the Spirit to help us.

This I think is a real challenge for people in the wealthy west. Because here by and large we don't need God in the way they do in Africa or other parts of the world. We just don't.

This coming week, Sue and I will be going into Charters School. They have asked us to speak about the Global Village. We are going to speak about the wonders of modern technology which make the furthest places close and distance a thing of the past, in one sense.

From our visit to Uganda in the autumn, we discovered up close and personal, we discovered at first hand that in Africa the people are fantastic, but they have so little. They

are content with their little and are not constantly after the latest upgrade or the new edition of whatever it is.

They need God because they can't buy their way to security or safety or plenty or sometimes even enough. They need God to come through. They need God to deliver. They need God to show up and to bring change and transformation, sometimes just for them to survive.

For so many people in the west, there is no sense of need, because we are too comfortable, we are too safe. Life is too easy and we are protected by and large from the real challenge of life and death which in Africa for some is a daily reality.

We don't need God in the way that they need God. We can do life perfectly well without him ... and many people in many places and dare I say it, in many churches just do. We just do life without reference to God; without real need for him.

All too often in the West, the difference between the lifestyle of the Christian and the person who is not a Christian is difficult to spot. We say we are followers of Jesus, we say we are willing to live by faith, to be known by love, to be a voice of hope ... but ...! *He will testify on my behalf .. you also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.*

Testifying is not just about standing up and speaking. It is that. But it's also about the choices we make and the lives we live being ways that the Spirit can testify to the world of the goodness and the mercy and the grace of God.

Someone was once in a lecture hall ready for a lecture. The teacher arrived wearing a bright red tie. Later that week in a supervision (a small group tutorial) the teacher asked the students whether they had understood what he had been talking about. One brave guy spoke up and said: "Understand? Of course we couldn't understand. We couldn't even hear you. Your tie was shouting too loudly".

Someone else has said that there is only one chance to make a first impression.

If the way we live and the choices we make are the things people see, are the first impression people get of us, they may not be able to hear us when we have things to say that might be important and helpful and true.

He will testify on my behalf ... you also are to testify ...

Would anyone know by the lifestyle choices we make, by the way we choose to spend our money or the things we give priority to in our working week and in our diary? Something to think about maybe?

When we are testifying in words or deeds, we need to make sure that as far as we possible we can be heard! We need to make sure if we can that when we call ourselves

church and community we are thinking about the impact we have on the community, the difference we can make in the community and the partnerships we can have with the community.

Sue and I were out at a meeting on Thursday lunchtime and on the way back we called in to Finchampstead Baptist Church. I say church: it's actually a sports centre, library, police check point, parish council offices, youth centre and cafe. It was amazing. One person's vision and major resourcing has completely transformed a community.

We just rocked up. We hadn't made an appointment. We just turned up on spec. The lady on the desk was really friendly and said we could have a look round if we wished. When we got to the sports hall which is where the church meets on a Sunday, we met Richard.

Richard then spent 20 minutes showing us round, giving us a guided tour of the upstairs suite of rooms and the downstairs. He could not have been more helpful or accommodating if he had tried. He showed us how the stage was assembled for worship, where the lights were and how the sound all linked up. He showed where are the youth equipment was and how it was used and why the kids all loved it. He spoke about it all with passion and energy and amazing enthusiasm.

The example he showed us of how a Christian should behave, should speak about the things that we are passionate about, should make visitors and guests really welcome was quite remarkable. He gave his testimony about the life and work of the church like his life depended on it.

Richard is not a Christian. He's not far away from the kingdom, but he had some really important things to teach us about excellent testimony.

So ... let's sum up ...

- Jesus' life on earth is coming to an end.
- He wants his followers in Gary's words the other week to get as close as possible to the Father and stay there.
- He tells his friends that there will be opposition if they become followers of his. It will not all be plain sailing. There'll be love and there'll be hate.
- But they don't have to do it on their own.
- He promises that the Spirit will come who will testify about Jesus and then will have testimony work for them to do as well.

Maybe these things could be true for us in our day and in our generation, right here and right now.

Let's stand and pray together.