

Bishop Karen's Sermon for 17th May
John 14: 15 – 21

From Desolation to Expectation



I don't know whether you are familiar with Snoopy cartoons. One goes like this – Linus is building castles in the sand. He tells Charlie Brown: 'Working with your hands is good therapy....It takes your mind off your troubles....whenever I feel depressed, I build sandcastles...I've been feeling pretty depressed lately!' Behind him we see a dozen or so sandcastles stretching into the distance.

I am not sure how you are feeling during this time of prolonged confinement. I think if I was to go to the beach, I might do very much the same thing as Linus. Whether it be boredom, or anxiety, or concerns for the future, or depression, there is a lot going on in our heads at the moment. So how timely is our gospel reading, particularly for us as Christians because the great thing we can take with us from our gospel reading this morning are those words from Jesus to his disciples: 'I will not leave you comfortless'

In our reading Jesus was anticipating the disciples own sense of desolation after the events that were coming their way, their Good Friday experience, their Easter Sunday experience, and the experience of Ascension, which we celebrate on Thursday, when he would leave them again – this time physically forever. John, in writing his gospel a number of years later, links together some of these sayings of Jesus for the purpose of encouraging the embryo Christian community, giving them a now, and not yet feel. Taking these promises from the past, to his present and into our future.

Little did the disciples know then what they had in store, or how they would feel like. The word 'comfortless' is translated in some versions of the Bible as 'desolate'.

It's a feeling that many experience in our world today and this is no joking matter. That is why current concerns about people's mental health and wellbeing are so important with depression being the most prevalent and the least treated serious illness in the west today. It is all too easy at times like this to feel far from God, therefore that promise from Jesus is very much for us too that he will not leave us comfortless.

There are times when all of us need to be comforted and now may be one of those times. In our gospel Jesus is telling his disciples that he cannot be with them always – at least not in the flesh that he must go away. He promises them, however, that we will send an Advocate, a Counsellor to take his place. This Counsellor is, of course, the Holy Spirit.

Christ's promise was fulfilled in a rather dramatic way on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon the disciples and turned their world upside down. That same Spirit is in the world today and can be our comforter, strength and enabler, if we open ourselves to Him.

There are three themes that dominate this passage. The first is LOVE. 'If you love me' says the Master, 'You will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father and he will give you another Counsellor...'

We could easily make a case that where there is no love, there is no comfort. I am certainly not saying that romantic love is essential to comfort but, one thing is certain, very few people crawl out of the valley of despond by themselves. We all need to give and receive love.

It is good to remind ourselves not only that God first loved us, but that he goes on loving us despite the way we sometimes behave or how much distance we feel from him. There is that wonderful Rembrandt picture of the return of the Prodigal Son, where the love of the Father is seen in his face as he greets the son he thought would never return. Heaven rejoices when we respond to God's love and our calling as Christians is to go and love others in return.

A Comedian once said this 'People who are feeling down, don't often take advice. If I were to give them advice, I would tell them to find somebody else who is in trouble and try and put a smile on their faces'. Another person has said, 'There are 10 ways to get out of feeling down. The first way is to help someone else. Next, repeat that nine times'.

Well, we cannot visit anyone easily at the moment, however we can ring people up or call to someone across the street or encourage someone on Facebook or via Zoom. Very often our reaction is to withdraw from everything and everyone when times are difficult, or we are feeling desolate. However, by connecting with people and loving them in whatever way they need we can find ourselves comforted and that is what the Holy Spirit, God's Comforter helps us to do.

The second theme of the passage is TRUTH. 'God will give you another Counsellor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.'

This teaching flies right in the face of how the world perceives faith. The world likes to think that Christians are people who will not face the facts, who live in a world of unreal dreams. But this wrong. People who think Christians live in an unreal world simply do not themselves have all the facts. To us it is quite evident that we live in a created universe.

I am sure we all have experienced that sense of God – whether in the wonder around us, the answers to prayer, the blessing we receive when we are worshipping God, or receiving Holy Communion, or being prayed for. Who has not stood on a mountain top, and admired the view and felt in their heart of hearts that there must be a wonderful creator God?

Truth is a difficult word in our present post truth world, where one statement or set of beliefs is as valid as another, even if there are a few lies in there somewhere too. Yet Christians believe that the pull of faith will always be stronger than that of disbelief whenever truth prevails.

God promises that the gift of his Holy Spirit will help us to speak truth, to speak out against injustice, to stand up for what we believe is the right action, to counter false information and lies. We leave each service in church commissioned with God's light to live as disciples in the world and we go not knowing how much influence our faith will have on other people.

When we or others are desolate, we need to open our eyes and ears and heart to the evidences of God which he has placed all around us. To contemplate his love, his power, his promises. Where is comfort to be found? – in love and in truth – truth about life and about God.

And the final theme of the passage is PRESENCE. Jesus was saying to his disciples in the passage that the only way he could be truly with them was if he went away from them. A theologian stated it superbly when he wrote 'Suppose, he had not gone away. Suppose he were here now. Suppose he were still in the Holy Lane at Jerusalem. Every ship that started for the East would be crowded with Christian pilgrims. Every train flying through Europe would be thronged with people going to see Jesus. Every mail bag would be full of letters from those in difficulty or need. Suppose you are in one of these ships? You have come to see Jesus; but you will never see him. Why? Because of the crowds. Jesus resolved that this should never be. It was necessary so that the Spirit could come and

make God known in the heart of every believer'. Or as someone else put it, 'Jesus had to leave somewhere in order to be everywhere'.

Amundsen was the first man to discover the magnetic meridian of the North Pole and to discover the South Pole. On one of his trips Amundsen took a homing pigeon with him. When he had finally reached the top of the world, he opened the bird's cage and set it free. One day his wife, back in Norway, looked up from the doorway of her home and saw this pigeon circling in the sky above. Immediately she knew that this was her husband's way of communicating his love all the way from the North Pole.

The Biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit is not a homing pigeon, but a dove. Still, the story fits. Christ could not remain with us in person. So, he sent a dove into our hearts to bear witness to his love. Under such circumstances who could be comfortless? 'I will not leave you desolate' he says, 'I will come to you'.

Love, truth, Christ's presence through the power of the Holy Spirit – these are the keys to avoiding a life of desolation. It is my prayer that all of us today will experience God's presence with us. And would encourage you that if you feel that God is absent, to ask him to become present again. I pray also that we will all, as we look ahead to Ascension and Pentecost, sense God and His Spirit afresh in some way during this time as we open ourselves up to God - in love, in truth and to the indwelling presence of his Spirit.