

Acts 17:22-31

John 14:15-21

Introduction

Something people quite often say is, "If only we'd lived in the time of Jesus, it would have been so much easier!" There is an impression that if we'd only been there, able to meet Jesus, to listen to his teaching and to see him healing people it might be easier for us to trust and follow him now, to understand more about who he was and what he calls us to be. He would have explained everything to us and told us what to do.

There are two basic problems with this point of view. First, the evidence of the Gospels suggests that the people around Jesus didn't see it like that. Many didn't believe him, opposed him and even some of his closest friends betrayed and denied him. Many people couldn't make him out. He was compelling but puzzling. Many thought he was mad.

Then secondly, at the last supper, in the conversations he had with his disciples we see that Jesus actually promised to be around with his people from that day to this. In fact he has promised that when he leaves his followers it will be easier, not harder. His people will be able to do things that they couldn't whilst he was with them.

He promises that he will send his own spirit, his own breath to live within each and every person who believes and trusts in him. It is this spirit who enables us to believe in him, who makes things clear to us, who gives us the power to follow Jesus and who transforms us with his fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and self-control..

In verse 16 he tells his listeners that the Father is going to send another 'advocate' to be with them. The word Jesus uses can be translated in various ways. It is 'helper', or 'comforter' or 'advocate'. All of these are correct translations of the word and all of them show different facets of the Spirit's character and role in the life of the Christian.

Comfort is a wonderful thing. All of us need to be comforted at various times and never so much as now. The picture I have of

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being comforted is a parent or loved one enveloping their distressed child in an embrace, holding them and soothing them and bringing strength and courage to deal with difficulties. Many of us are missing that human touch, that enveloping, that comfort at this time of social distancing but Jesus promises that when he comes the Holy Spirit will bring comfort. He also brings help to enable us to trust and to follow Jesus.

The other translation of the word and the one used in our reading this morning is Advocate. An advocate is someone who, often in a legal context, speaks on behalf of an individual to explain things from their point of view. The advocate pleads the case.

As a result of the presence of the promised spirit in our lives Christians today are in a better position than even those who followed Jesus when he was on earth. Now with the spirit living within us, transforming us, giving us power and wisdom we have the potential to live powerful, fulfilled lives of witness to Jesus. We have him guiding and helping us. We have him comforting and strengthening us. We have him pleading our case before the heavenly judge and we have him transforming us with his power to speak of Jesus to others, to live holy lives and to bring help and comfort to others.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever.' It can be easy to misunderstand this promise. It isn't a conditional statement. Jesus isn't saying that he will only ask God to send the spirit if we obey him. What he is saying is that a natural result of loving someone is to want to please them. That obedience to Jesus comes from our love for him, our desire to please him and to work with him. Our lives demonstrate our love for God and as we show him we love him he fills us with his presence, his power and his wisdom.

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On Thursday we will be celebrating the Feast of the Ascension when Jesus returned to his Father in glory. We then begin to look forward to the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit. This year we plan to celebrate Ascension via a zoom service. If you would like to join this event please let me know and we will send you an invitation to the service.

Over recent years there time between Ascension day and Pentecost has become a time when Christians throughout the world are invited to focus on bringing the light of Christ to people everywhere. In this time of isolation and suffering this is such a wonderful opportunity to bring Christ's love to others. There will be information on the website as to how you can get involved in this.