

6th Sunday of Easter – May 21 2017.

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14: 15-21.

This is the last Sunday before Ascension, and we will celebrate that festival in great style, ecumenically, on Thursday night. Liturgy can arrange texts in the order that speaks to the season, but it is not so neat if you just read through John's Gospel. He doesn't even have an Ascension story. But today, we have a section of John's Gospel in which Jesus talks about his leaving and the coming of the Holy Spirit, which we'll celebrate in a fortnight.

Jesus starts by setting out the way we are to live in the time between Jesus' leaving and his coming in glory. We are to love him by keeping his commandments. His going is associated with his death, but his death also represents his coming. In his earthly life, he has been our advocate and promised to answer all our prayers, and when he leaves us, he will send us another advocate, the Spirit of Truth. Moloney writes beautifully that 'what the Spirit *does* for the disciples is the prolongation and perfection of what Jesus *does* for them.' And a few verses on from this morning's reading, John writes, *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.* (Jn 14:26). The Spirit of Truth will help us to continue to understand the earthly teaching and life of Jesus as we gather together in his name around his table.

But it will be more than just understanding Jesus and knowing him in our hearts and heads. Jesus tells us *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.* (Jn 14:18) Today's Gospel can be understood at two different levels. At one level, you might think it refers to the coming in Glory, the final completion of the Kingdom, but it can also be seen to mean that Jesus is coming to us NOW through the Spirit. It is in the Spirit that we have an experience of Jesus' presence, and some experience also of the way Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him, and that this is the kind of way Jesus will be in and with us, we in him and he in us. Pretty mind-blowing stuff.

In contrast to the Gospel painting a picture of intimacy with God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, Acts concentrates on something else. We have the account of how Paul spent his time in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy. He wandered around the city, as any tourist might, but then turned that knowledge into an opportunity to address them about Jesus. Now the Athenians loved meeting in the market place, and listening to speakers, preferably something new that would titillate their minds. In one of his epistles, Paul later warns his flock about the dangers of this mindset. But nevertheless, that's how it was in Athens. Paul had noticed all their religious shrines, and even one to an unknown god – a good way

to hedge your bets, as it were. You wouldn't want to anger any god, in fact if you paid attention and made the right gifts or sacrifices to each god, it was a good way of making sure your life went well, and you avoided things going wrong. A way of controlling the god in some sense.

But Paul wants to set them straight, and he uses a quote from one of their own poets to start this process. "In him we live and move and have our being" and "For we too are his offspring." (Acts 17:28) Paul uses this to show that therefore the gods couldn't possibly be made of gold or stone, and starts to tell them about the God of all creation who he knows, and the judgement that Jesus will make. And how does he know this? Because God has raised Jesus from the dead.

I don't know about you, but I find the Johannine appeal of intimacy more inviting than hearing about judgement. But that is why it is important to gather together as a community of faith and hear different readings – not necessarily ones I would have chosen myself – to balance our understanding of the revelation about God in which the Spirit continues the work and teaching of Jesus. One of the dangers of people who say they are Christian, but are not part of a community of faith, is that they can 'cherry pick' the bits of the faith that they like. I personally would never have chosen texts about coming to faith through Jesus' judgement. We need the both/and understanding of the Scriptures, not an either/or.

But let's go back to the Gospel. While we might prefer to bask in the knowledge that the advocate gives us the ongoing experience and knowledge of Jesus, we can't just turn in on ourselves, and keep this nice experience all to ourselves.

At the end of each Communion service, the deacon tells us all to GO. In the purple seasons of Advent and Lent, we use the version 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. Today it will be 'Go in the peace of Christ' with the implication that you will go in peace TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD.

What does that mean for us? I am not advocating that we start preaching on street corners, like Paul did in Athens. But I am inviting us all to live so well in the ongoing presence of Christ in the Spirit, that people will notice a difference. They will notice our peace, our lack of striving for the latest gadget, maybe the fact that we are reflective rather than being glued to our device as we walk along, maybe that we have a stance of thankfulness rather than carping and criticising everything, the way we don't hold grudges, the way we go out of our way to help other people. I think people would notice that, don't you?

I would like to finish by setting you some homework, and the dog can't eat this one. I would like to invite you to turn the phrase 'in him we live and move and have our being' over and over in your minds, until it

becomes a prayer. We can Christianise it by our understanding of the 'him' "in whom we live and move and have our being" as the Spirit who teaches us about Jesus, or Jesus' ongoing presence with us, or the Father who created us and all things. But as you walk to the bus, or sit in the car at the lights, just turn this over in your mind, with an open heart, and see where God takes you.

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ⁱ Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 403.