Sermon for the 5th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

'Do you get it?'

One of the more upsetting consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic has been the widespread separation that it has caused. All of us have become physically isolated from our family, friends, neighbours, clubs and societies and of course our beloved church communities – some of the most important relationships that we might previously have taken for granted. Most distressing of all has been the separation caused by the widespread loss of lives; the thousands of families who have lost loved ones, often without an opportunity to be with them or even to say goodbye.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus specifically addresses the issue of separation. He was preparing his disciples for his impending death and sought to reassure. He told them not to let their hearts be troubled by the separation that they would soon experience. Yes, he would be leaving them physically but they would not be separated forever. Jesus began by saying something that may have appeared to them to be somewhat strange; not only must his disciples believe in God but they must also believe in him. Now whilst they all undoubtedly believed in God; I am not convinced that they had yet entirely grasped who Jesus really was - that he and that he and God the Father were one.

Jesus explained that he was going to prepare a dwelling place for them and would then come and take them to himself: '…so that where I am, there you may be also'. But we read that Thomas just didn't get it. He said: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' (14:5). Jesus' response was straight and to the point: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (14:6)

Jesus went on to explain that if they knew him (which they did), they will know his Father (God) as well. This time it was Philip's turn not to get it, for he said: 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied' (14:8). By now Jesus was exasperated with his disciples since despite being with him for at least three years and witnessing the power of God, they still hadn't understood that he and the Father were not two separate entities but one and the same.

Returning briefly to what Jesus had said earlier about preparing a dwelling place for them. This home or dwelling place that he was going to prepare for them (and for all believers) was not just for when they died but for the here and now – the present. It was an open invitation to communion – to union with the Divine; to enter the Holy of Holies and dwell or rest in the everlasting presence of God. However, they would only come to realise this for themselves when the Holy Spirit of God was outpoured at Pentecost and they would come to experience the abiding indwelling presence of God in their lives. Then they would see and fully comprehend; then they would get it.

In out reading from Acts chapter 7, we see however that Stephen certainly got it. Filled with the Holy Spirit he saw the heavenly portal opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. But this was too much for the High Priest and Jewish Council who covered their ears, for they didn't want to hear such blasphemy and rushed out to drag Stephen out of the city to stone him to death.

Even as Stephen was being murdered, he followed in the footsteps of Jesus by forgiving them; for he knew that they didn't get as he did; that Jesus and the God the Father are one. His final words were: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (7:59) and this says it all. For like Jesus, he was returning to that dwelling place where his God-given spirit would rest forever in the presence of God the Father and the Son.

The message of the Gospel (the Good News of Christ) is that through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the indwelling Holy Spirit, humankind is invited into a living relationship with the God from whom they have become estranged. However, this is only possible when we recognise for ourselves who Jesus really was and is; that he and the Father are one. Heaven's portal is open for us to enter and the invitation is there for all. As we read in Revelation 3:20:

> 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me'.

In a few minutes time, I will celebrate Holy Communion. As I do so we do we will once again remember the New Covenant that Jesus has made for us through his broken body and shed blood and how in

partaking in the bread and wine - symbols of his body and blood we are also united in one body and now live his risen life

I wonder, do you, like the first Christian martyr Stephen get it? Or are you like the First Century Jewish religious leaders in Acts who covered their ears rather than entertain such a possibility?

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10th May 2020