# Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)
# 'Lonely no more'

Loneliness and social isolation is something that all of us will experience at some point in our lives. It is no respecter of age and affects both young and old alike. It might be described as 'an unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship'. Whilst the number of people in this country experiencing loneliness was high before the COVID-19 pandemic, it has rocketed since the imposition of lockdown and social distancing. So much so that psychiatrists are warning that they may well be a surge of people experiencing PTSD-like symptoms in the future.

Jesus addresses the issue of loneliness and separation in this morning's reading from St John's Gospel – a continuation of his farewell discourse to his disciples. Death is often perceived as the ultimate separator; here Jesus was preparing his disciples for his impending death. He knew that his absence would hit them hard since they had developed a deep and abiding friendship with him and had looked to him for support and guidance.

Jesus said to them 'In a little while the world will no longer see me' (14:18). There would be a Jesus-shaped void left in their lives… or would there? For he goes on to say: "I will not leave you orphaned" (14:18). Although he was about to die, they would see him briefly again in his temporal resurrected form. But even once he had ascended to God the Father they would not be left alone. For the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the Comforter would not only come and abide with them; the Spirit of God would dwell in them. Just as Jesus and the God the Father were one so too they would one; no longer separated from him but united eternally.

There was however, two conditions to them receiving the promised Holy Spirit – love and obedience: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (14:15). These reflect the two greatest commandments that I talked about a couple of Sundays ago:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' There is no commandment greater than these'. (Mark 12: 30-31).

The imparting of God's Holy Spirit was and is conditional on a believer wholeheartedly loving God and obeying his commandments.

The Holy Spirit would certainly not be some unfamiliar entity to his disciples. For Jesus said: 'You know him, because he abides with you, and will be in you' (14:17). It would not be a stranger who would come to abide in them. For God already abided with them in the bodily form of their beloved friend and master Jesus with whom they had lived for the past three years.

I find it a matter of great sadness that so many people (including Christians) fail to understand the sheer mind-blowing implications this has for us today. So many people (whether they are aware of it or not) are searching for that 'something' that will make their lives complete – a void crying to be filled. Their lives become a quest for that elusive so-called Holy Grail. They search but often in the wrong places. Yet the answer is closer than many of us realise.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was at the Areopagus in Athens and having carefully looked at the Athenian's objects of worship saw how extremely religious they were in many ways. They were close, but still not quite close enough. Paul's eyes fell upon an altar to 'an unknown god' (17:23). Focussing on this he went on to explain who the One true God was and is. That God was not to be found in man-made objects; the God that they were searching for was even closer than they realised. "Indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'. (17:27).

Do you know that for yourself, that the breath of God is within you and that God in Christ calls each one of us into relationship. The term 'born again Christian' has become somewhat of a cliché and sadly has developed negative connotations. However, that was the crux of Jesus' message. We are born again when we realise for ourselves that we are not isolated individuals but spiritual beings created for a loving relationship with God and one another. Union with God means no more loneliness or isolation.

'They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them' (14:20)

May each of us know God's abiding presence with us now and always. Amen.

Rev Andrew Jacobson

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