

Meditation - Sunday, 29 May 2011

Today we start to think about the most difficult subject of all: the Holy Spirit! We can just about understand the idea of God as Creator of the world, the universe and all that it contains. We've just passed through Easter and so we have heard about how God tried very hard to explain over many centuries just how much he loved us and we didn't understand and so he sent his own son. In Jesus, God came himself; he was personified; he became as we are and proved to us that death is not the end by coming back to life after suffering a terrible death, a human death, on the cross. But then, of course, he was to go away again after the resurrection and it is here, in our reading from John, that Jesus tries to console his disciples about his imminent departure, that he tries to make them understand what will happen and that he will not leave them alone, that, in fact, they need never be alone again. How do we explain the Holy Spirit to anyone who hasn't experienced it? Who is the Holy Spirit? How can we access him or her and what will happen when he or she becomes part of our life?

Well let's look at how Jesus describes the Spirit.

The very first thing to note refers back to our discussion about my best friend, Bramble. [*the minister's black labrador*]

"If you love me, keep my commandments."

Easy, you may say, or is it? It's about love, isn't it? And love is about obedience. If you love me, do what I ask you to do, and what is that? Here, of course, Jesus is referring to the law. And what is the law? Well, he has told us that all of the law is contained in these words: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength and your neighbour as yourself.'

The Jews were completely hidebound by laws and Jesus had spoken out against that kind of legalism on many occasions telling, his disciples that the law must be written, not on their foreheads or on their doorposts, but on their hearts. For the Jews, the people of the Old Testament, the law was embodied in the ten commandments, but these in turn are contained in a culture that we're not a part of, and so they're open in our modern day and, in fact, in each generation to misinterpretation, but this commandment of Jesus is much more generic. That doesn't mean to say that the ten commandments don't matter; of course they do, but we need something from Jesus that helps us to relate the law to our own time and culture. Jesus' new commandment can refer to any generation of humankind and any culture! Of course we may have different interpretations of what that means, but our motives must always bear examination, and the more mature in matters of faith we become, the more understanding of Jesus' commandments we'll acquire. And that will happen because we're constantly

seeking to please our Lord, looking all the time for a better way. All of us struggle with the way the next generation interprets the social and cultural norms of our day. When I was a wee girl, we sat in church in rows of silent (or almost silent) children. No one shouted out or answered any questions though because the minister didn't ask any questions. We sat quietly and were told what to think. And almost everyone was a member or adherent of their parish church. In school we sat in rows in desks until we were told we could go. When the minister came to visit, children were sent out of the room and the minister (and sometimes his wife) would be served with the best china and everyone was very polite. Many ministers never really got to know their parishioners because folks kept their troubles hidden much more than we do today. We have learned in recent years that it is better to share our problems.

We've discovered that children learn better by finding out things for themselves. We've found out that ministers and other professionals are just people and are subject to all the same things that everyone else is!

And so now, the kitchen table and a mug or the byre or the front garden or the summer house is quite suitable for a visit from the minister, and now ministers are privileged to hear some of the deepest concerns and worries of their folks, and that is surely a good thing. People haven't changed, but the way we experience each other is very different to the way we experienced life 50 years ago for instance. That kind of change is often hard for us to accept because it reminds us that we are yesterday's people. It reminds us that the world belongs to the next generation and is leaving us behind, and that's a bit scary.

In our growth as Christians, in our striving to follow Christ's example, we need to remember this. We are told the Word became flesh, not print! So, of course book learning and studying our Bible is very important, but the real learning comes from our relationship with the LIVING Word, and that is Jesus Christ and he's not here in the flesh anymore so we need to access the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

Okay, so in the spirit of trying to keep up with the times, let's look at what Jesus is trying to tell us about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of truth, as he calls him or her. Jesus tells us that he will send us the parakletos -- the Greek word used is rather difficult to translate. It means much more than 'Helper' or 'Comforter' or 'Advocate' as the Spirit is described in different translations. In our 21st-century world, maybe we could understand something of the Spirit by thinking of a kind of personal trainer or lifestyle coach. But the kind of lifestyle coach that gets involved in all aspects of our lives, offering guidance for everything from our health and wellbeing to our charitable pursuits, our working life and even to the very intimate parts of our lives with our friends or our lovers or our family. The Holy Spirit is our one true ally, the one who understand all about us, who is with us in our struggles and our triumphs. But here's the thing: this relationship is like

all others. It is a two way street. The Holy Spirit is not a gatecrasher! It takes two to tango. There is an agreement to be made, one forged out of love and suffering; one that requires obedience and commitment. Most personal trainers will require a certain amount of commitment, or they simply cannot do their work. Joining a gym and paying the subscription doesn't get us fit. It's only when we get involved that the change starts to take place. It's exactly the same with our faith. You can pay your dues, or in the past your pew rent, you can fill your envelope, you can even come to church every week WITHOUT getting really involved.

The Holy Spirit is God's gift to those who want to jump right in, those who are willing to give it a go. The Spirit is at once teacher, comforter, friend, helper, witness, leader, constant companion throughout our lives, helping us to cope with the changes that we are all faced with every day.

In the words of one of our modern hymns. *No storm can shake my inmost calm* while to that rock I'm clinging. While God is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing.

Amen.