

Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

The last few weeks have been a slightly disorientating shuttle backwards and forwards through John's Gospel, and with this final passage for the season of Easter we are once again chronologically back before the death of Jesus. However as we come face to face with one of the most striking and beautiful statements he makes, we also find ourselves taken to a timeless place – a different centre out of which to live and act, and one which gives us a another lens through which to examine our responses to conflict situations.

Preparation

Take a blank sheet of paper and write down all the words, phrases, or ideas which you associate with the word 'home.'

or

Draw or make something which represents what the idea of 'home' means to you.

or

Find a copy of Rublev's Icon of the Trinity and spend some time simply sitting quietly in front of it.

Text

John 14: 23-29

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you.

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.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.

And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

Comment

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

We might legitimately call John’s Gospel ‘The Gospel of Love’ so strong is his repetitive emphasis on the theme. It is John who tells us that the primary motivation for the Incarnation was love (Jn 3:16); John’s narrative which features a ‘beloved disciple’; John’s Jesus who uses verbs relating to love on 57 different occasions; and John who only records one commandment being issued by Jesus – the commandment to love which appeared in last Sunday’s Gospel (Jn 13:34) as part of this discourse to his disciples, and which will be reiterated in even more emphatic terms (Jn 15:13) before it is over.

Hand in hand with his ‘love’ language, John also has an emphasis on ‘knowing’. Alongside ‘fullness of knowledge’ – the kind which Jesus has of the Father – there is also the journey of slowly evolving and deepening knowledge which John sets before us time and time again: Nicodemus, coming furtively to Jesus at night; a solitary Samaritan woman at a well in the heat of the noon day sun; a man blind from birth; Martha and Mary weeping at the grave of their brother Lazarus; Thomas – dubious and doubting in a locked room – these stories of encounter with Jesus and the ensuing dialogues back and forth show us journeys from incomprehension to glimmers of understanding or better knowledge, to growing recognition and deepening love. We cannot love what we do not know.

But such evolving understanding, and the movement into fuller, deeper knowledge, requires an ongoing intimacy of engagement. Thus we come to the final, striking, element in Jesus’ opening comment which brings these two themes of knowing and loving together: *“we will come to them and make our home with them.”* In Jn 1:14, when John first describes Jesus living with us, the word he uses relates to setting up

a tent – a temporary home which can be taken down when the time comes to move on (as is just about to happen for Jesus). In contrast v23 here refers to a staying place, an abiding place: a place of shared space, of encounter; a hospitable space where the journey of coming to know, and thus to mutual understanding and deepening love, can move towards its fulfilment. It is this place where the disciples, and those that will follow them, will finally understand and experience (will ‘know’) that “*I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*”

I think this a quite extraordinary image: our love for God creates a hospitable space into which God can come to know and be known; as this happens we in turn are drawn into the hospitable space which is the life of the Trinity, a place where we become ‘wrapped into ...the source of life, the source of love and the source of friendship’ (Pádraig Ó Tuama)

This provides a template for how we should approach our relationships with others, including those with whom we might be in situations of conflict. We cannot understand (or love) what we do not know – but to grow in, and into, understanding, requires a fundamental attitude of hospitality, a willingness to make spaces into which others can enter and feel safe and ‘at home’. It also involves a willingness to risk letting down our own defences as we invite others to participate in our realities and so to know us better. In the words of Gabriel Marcel “*to provide hospitality is ‘truly to communicate something of oneself’*”

Moreover this dynamic of hospitality also necessitates a fundamental shift in orientation since “*if I am completely absorbed in myself, concentrated on my own sensations, feelings, anxieties, it will obviously be impossible for me to receive, to incorporate in myself, the message of the other*” (Marcel). Hence as long as my concerns are my central preoccupation, I will always make the Other a means to my ends – whether to defend my own position or justify my own choices or narratives. Just as ‘loving obedience’ makes spaces for God to enter and inhabit, so displacing ourselves from the centre of our attention/action (which is of course a key element of such loving obedience) makes room not only for others to come in but also for the promised and transformative work of the Holy Spirit. For an example of this revisit last week’s set New Testament reading from Acts 11 where Peter, in response to the Spirit’s instruction to “go with [these men] and not to make a distinction between them and us”, exercises a ‘hospitality of the heart’ not only to those who have sought him out in Joppa but also to those who are criticising him in Jerusalem. What flows from this changes the course of the early church.

Response

Think about a situation of conflict in which you are (or have recently been) involved and then, depending on which preparatory task you did:

Either

Choose some key positive words or images from your reflection on ‘home’. Now try to imagine and articulate what shape these would take if you were trying to make a more hospitable space (physically/conversationally) in which to meet with those with whom you are in conflict. Could you put any of these in place before your next encounter?

or

Spend some more time with Rublev's icon but this time try to describe the interaction between the figures (including yourself as the 4th person present at the table). Now imagine the figures represent yourself and others involved in the conflict you considered. How does it make you feel? Does it suggest to you any ways in which you might make a more positive conversational space when you are interacting with those with whom you are in conflict?

Prayer

Jesus our hearth companion
You knew what it was to give and receive
the hospitality of the heart
Help us to make warm and generous places
into which we can welcome friends and enemies alike
that through knowing and being known
understanding may deepen
and love expand

for even so will your Kingdom come
Amen