**24th May 2015 Pentecost**

**John 15.26-16.17**

We finish our look at Jesus farewell sermon in John’s gospel chapters 14 -17 – where Jesus gives his last will and testament to his disciples before he goes to the cross. This is heartfelt advice about life and what it means to follow him.

We have looked at his words about trusting him that he is the Way, the truth and the life, that death will not have the last word. Last week we considered how Jesus urges his disciples to abide in him, like a Vine and its branches, to stay in fellowship with each other, to bear fruit and cope with those pruning experiences in life, believing that God can bring good out of them. And to know deeply that we have been chosen – we are people with purpose.

In this passage he spells out the consequences of being a follower of him – that it will involve persecution and hatred but that Jesus will give us his Spirit to help us stay faithful and be a powerful witness.

Growing up in Burnley, an old mill town in Lancashire, Pentecost was known as Whit Sunday and we went on the Whit Walks. Churches, chapels, Sunday schools would parade through town behind banners. There would be brass bands and choirs and the girls would be dressed in white and the boys would do all they could to get those dresses dirty.

With the coming of industrialisation it became convenient to close down whole towns for a week in order to clean and maintain the machinery in the mills and factories. The week of closure, or [wakes week](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wakes_week), was often held at Whitsuntide. A report in John Harlan and T.T. Wilkinson's *Lancashire Folk lore* (1882) reads:

*It is customary for the cotton mills etc., to close for Whitsuntide week to give the hands a holiday; the men going to the races etc. and the women visiting Manchester on Whit-Saturday, thronging the markets, the Royal Exchange and the Infirmary Esplanade, and other public places: And gazing in at the shop windows, whence this day is usually called 'Gaping Sunday'.*[*[13]*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitsun#cite_note-Roud-13)

Some of the Whit walks still survive – my last pastorate was in Warrington and the Whit Walking Day was huge for the town – that was 15 years ago so I don’t know whether it still is. The schools took it over – so it became less about the churches and more about the schools.

I thought Whit was short for Witness – marking the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the first apostles who went out to witness to the risen Lord and started the church. But apparently the name comes from ‘white Sunday’ – as new believers wore white on this day. It could also be derived from wisdom – or wit in old English – meaning understanding because the Spirit is the Spirit who will guide us into all truth.

We used to say these were walks of witness – the Christians in a town would walk publicly to declare their faith – they weren’t ashamed to say they were followers of Jesus. Sadly, like Easter and Christmas, in British culture the explicitly Christian nature of these festivals is being lost and diluted as the influence of the Christian church diminishes.

Last week Asher’s bakery in Belfast lost out in court over a case taken against them for refusing to decorate a cake supporting Same Sex Marriage, which is illegal in Northern Ireland. The judge decided they had been guilty of discrimination.

Speaking outside Belfast County Court after the ruling, Asher’s general manager Daniel McArthur insisted that their issue was not with the customer and his sexual orientation but with the message on the cake.

"The ruling suggests that all business owners will have to be willing to promote any cause or campaign, no matter how much they disagree with it."

Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has backed the legal action: It would have led to a situation where anyone could claim the right to discriminate on the basis that they disagreed with another person’s beliefs.”

But a prominent human rights barrister Aidan O’Neill has claimed Muslim printers could be forced to produce cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed if the case is upheld. A T-shirt company with a lesbian owner could be forced to print tops denouncing same-sex marriage as an “abomination” or an atheist web designer be asked to build a website claiming the world was made by God in six days.

The row over the cake has divided opinion sharply in Northern Ireland, and led to attempts to introduce a so-called “conscience clause” enabling businesses to refuse to provide services if they go against their religious convictions.

A conclusion that could be made from the case is that some Christian views (for there are different Christian views about same sex marriage) are no longer protected in society and are seen as unacceptable to the majority and more significantly, the powerful.

Elsewhere in the world the persecution of Christians is more explicit and violent. The western media is all concerned about the possible destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, recently captured by Islamic state, but there has been hardly any mention or any action about protecting the Syrian Christians who are being slaughtered in the advance of the Islamists.

The Barnabus fund reports how Islamists burnt churches in Niger and one of the church leaders said ‘they can destroy everything but they can’t take Jesus away from us’ He prays that the militants will be convicted by their forgiveness and turn their hearts to Christ.

In verse 18 of chapter 15 Jesus says ‘if the world hates you, it hated me first’. The word ‘if’ here means ‘since’ so Jesus does not doubt that this will be the disciple’s experience. William Temple writing at the end of the Second World War, said that the world would not hate angels for being angelic; but it does hate people for being Christian. It grudges them their new character; it is tormented by their peace; it is infuriated by their joy’. Jesus puts his finger on the reason for the world’s hatred; it is because we do not belong to the world ‘the world hates us because we are not part of its system. It will oppose those who do not conform. Who witness to another Lord, another kingdom.

Of course it has also been true that Christians have persecuted others – and that in itself is a scandal and betrays the gospel. But it doesn’t take away from these stark warnings by Jesus.

At the start of chapter 16 he says I have told you all this to avoid the breakdown of your faith’ other versions say I have told you this so you will not go astray. The word ‘astray’ used to describe the stick that is the trigger for a trap, which could be pulled away, trapping birds in a net. So a better translation would be ‘so you won’t be trapped into losing your faith’.

The Holy Spirit will help Christians to keep their faith and convict others of the need to place their faith in Jesus Christ. How is the Spirit to do this?

In verse 26 of chapter 15 Jesus has called the Spirit the Advocate. Other translations use the word Counsellor or Comforter or Strengthener. The context is about being in a law court – facing accusations, being under trial. The Spirit is alongside to defend your case. The Spirit comes from the Father, and will live in them, telling them and telling the world through them, who Jesus was and is. But they mustn’t get lured into talking about themselves. That might well make them paranoid, and it will make their hearers either bored or angry. They must talk about Jesus. The world won’t like it, but it must be done.

The Spirit will bear witness to me says Jesus. You are my witnesses.

So the Spirit is the Spirit of truth. All that Jesus said and did was linked to the truth. He called himself the truth. There are no half measures about Jesus. We need to make truth our aim – not half-truths or half measures. We have the life of Jesus, his deeds and actions and reactions to help us know the truth. Sometimes we can read isolated passages in scripture and believe they say this or that – or give us a picture of God that is on the face of it at variance with the truth we see in Jesus. The key to understanding scripture is the Word made flesh brought to us by the Living Word – the Spirit – ‘The spirit of truth will guide us – but he will not speak on his own authority but will speak what he hears and take what is mine and make it known to you’ says Jesus.

He is sent from the Father to testify about Jesus. It is the work of the Spirit to testify about Jesus. At the very least it means that when we are witnessing we will not be doing it alone.

And that the Spirit will prove to the world that it is wrong. It is wrong on three accounts that matter.

First the Spirit will demonstrate that the world is wrong in relation to sin. In other words the world is guilty of sin. This can only be, Jesus insists, because the world is bent on its own way rather than God’s way.

The word ‘convict’ is not easy to translate but it tells how the Spirit works in an unbeliever’s life. It can mean to convince, expose, reveal, show, teach and even cross examine. The spirit will do whatever is necessary to make the unbeliever aware of the guilt of sin, whereas the plain words of Jesus alone can’t do this, ‘because the world does not believe in him’.

The Prayer team are studying a book called the Essential Guide to Healing by Bill Johnston and Randy Clark. The book starts by the authors sharing their story about how God has used them in the healing ministry. Randy Clark shared how at the age of 16 his faith had suffered a setback. He was in danger of going astray – as Jesus warned. His grandfather had died of cancer at the age of 62 and he could not understand why he hadn’t been healed despite all the prayers for him. It was the height of the Vietnam War and his school’s former heroes were coming home without legs or even dead. The war angered him and he was also depressed about a personal relationship that had gone wrong. He got involved in smoking marijuana on a daily basis for ten months and he wanted to experiment and started to slip into the drug culture.

He writes:

‘*I wanted to visit the far country – but only to visit it. I never wanted to stay there, so I stayed in church too, though I knew I was a big hypocrite. Yet I was afraid to stop going to church, lest I become so deeply trapped in sin that I could not escape my self-made pigsty to return home.*

*A girlfriend’s older brother was a Methodist preacher. He was the first person I ever saw hold a healing meeting in a church, and I liked and respected him. God used him to bring me under conviction. After not seeing me for a while, he commented to my mother that I did not seem like the Randy he remembered. I thought about that comment a lot.’*

A couple of years later he got over his doubts and gave his heart back to God. Four days later he was involved in a terrible car accident that left partially paralysed. He lay in his hospital bed thinking how glad he was that he had given his life back to God. That he had no fear of death because he knew spiritually he was ready to meet God and how different this would be if he had gone astray.

Friends at church were praying constantly for him and one night he woke up to realise that he felt no more pain and thought to himself that God had healed him and he should get up and walk. Which he did, much to the anger and dismay of the medical staff. They yelled to him to get back into bed, which he did, but then he kept getting out of bed. Eventually they released him and he went out into the world to testify to what God had done in his life and to seek further anointing of the Holy Spirit to give him a ministry of healing in the name of Jesus.

Significant in this story is how he believed the holy Spirit used that Methodist preacher’s casual words ‘ that Randy wasn’t himself’ to eventually bring him under conviction.

If you have friends and family far from God – even wandering off into the far country, it can be heart breaking. We are burdened by their apparent rejection of God or the breakdown of their faith. Then we need more than ever to pray for the Holy Spirit to bring them under conviction. To keep on praying for that but also to leave the matter with God to work out and use us and others to convince, reveal, show, teach and even cross examine.

Secondly the spirit will demonstrate that the world is wrong in relation to justice. The world thinks that justice is on its side. But the vindication of Jesus himself – which consists of going away to the Father – being exalted in the ascension after the resurrection – is the sign that Jesus was right and is the Son of God. If its justice you want, we already know the verdict. God has decided in favour of Jesus as the righteous one. All who follow Jesus share in that verdict. There is no other name under heaven by which we are saved. The judgement here is not about the everyday judgements we make, that law courts make. It is the ultimate judgement – about Jesus Christ – who he is and his significance for life, our life and the life of the world.

Thirdly the Spirit will demonstrate that the world is wrong in relation to judgement, which here means condemnation. The world supposes I can pass judgement on Jesus’ followers. But the events about to unfold, the events of Jesus death and resurrection indicate decisively that they are wrong. These events mean that the ruler of the world – the dark power that has kept humans and the world enslaved – has been condemned. His power has been broken. Death itself, the weapons of tyrants and particularly of Satan, is a defeated foe. The cross was a decisive victory with eternal consequences.

In Libya, many Egyptian Christians were beheaded by Islamic state I February. They were given the ultimatum to convert to Islam or be executed. They chose execution rather than renounce their faith. Their martyrdom has strengthened the church.

The video of their beheading shows that “in the moment of their barbaric execution”, some of the Christians were repeating the words “Lord, Jesus Christ,” he said.

said Bishop Mina of the Egyptian Coptic Church said “The name of Jesus was the last word on their lips,” before adding that, like the early Church martyrs, “they entrusted themselves to the one who would receive them soon after. That name, whispered in the last moments, was like the seal of their martyrdom.”

Following the news of the murders in Libya, Christians in the various dioceses of Egypt began praying and fasting, as the government called for seven days of national mourning. Several Egyptian bishops have spoken about constructing churches, dedicated to the 21 martyrs, in their dioceses.

Back in Libya, members of the Catholic community resolved to stay put, despite the killings and the emphatic calls from various authorities to evacuate the country.

“Few of us remain,” said Bishop Giovanni Martinelli of Tripoli, Libya. Nuns have decided to stay because of the dire medical needs in the city after the evacuation of the medical staff at the private St James Hospital.

“It is for them that I remain,” the bishop said. “At this time, the situation is calm, but we do not know how things will evolve. Anyway, as I have said many times, so long as there is one Christian here, I will remain.”

We pray for the strengthening of the Holy Spirit for these our Christian brothers and sisters.

Now at last you can see how the advocate is also the comforter and counsellor. Because the Holy Spirit will do all these things, those who suffer persecution and hatred for the name of Jesus can trust that the judge of all the earth will do what is right. But at the same time all this comes with a challenge. How will the spirit do it? Will it not be, at least impart, through the people in whom the Helper comes to live? Will it not, at least in part, be through their speaking out, under the spirit’s guidance, on behalf of those suffering injustice and oppression? Ow will the Spirit use you in witnessing to the truth of Jesus Christ?

The disciples, including us today, will never reach the stage of knowing everything about spiritual truth. It is the function of the Spirit to guide disciples into all truth (verse 13). This means we must seek his guidance. Particularly when we read the scriptures. The Spirit will glorify Jesus by taking what is his and making it known to us.

Lord glorify yourself through us.