**29th May 2011**

**Focus Scripture: John 14:15–21**

The main speaker at our church weekend at Lee Abbey liked to crack a joke to start his sessions with a smile. He told one about a bishop who went to visit one of his parishes one Sunday and sat in the congregation whilst the vicar started his sermon with a joke. The vicar said the other day I found myself in the arms of another man’s wife. The congregation sat upright and attentive at this point. The vicar went on ‘my mother gave me a hug’. The congregation were relieved and the Bishop impressed at this impre4ssive way of grabbing people’s attention at the start of a speech. The following week the Bishop had to deliver an address at a major civic function. The Mayor was there, the local MP and other civic dignitaries and business leaders. The Bishop started off, ‘the other day I found myself in he arms of another man’s wife’. There was a hushed shocked silence. The Bishop paused and then looked worried before saying ‘and for the life of me I can’t remember whose wife it was!’

Sadly the news this week has been about the court injunction of a Manchester united Footballer, whose name I cannot mention for legal reasons although I could tweet it if I knew how to tweet, , trying to stop the truth getting out about his alleged affair with a model. As someone said on BBC Question Time if they kept their trousers up and stayed faithful to their wives they wouldn’t fear the truth.

In our passage today Jesus talks about the truth and says his Spirit will guide his disciples into the truth. Last week we had the passage in John 14 where Jesus says he is the Way the Truth and the life. In our Western culture such a statement is offensive and controversial.

It isn’t just Johns’ gospel that you lose if you embrace this idea. The whole of the New Testament – the whole of early Christianity – insists that the one true and living God, the creator, is the God of Israel; and that the God of Israel has acted decisively, within history, to bring Israel’s story to its proper goal, and through that to address, and rescue, the world. The idea of a vague general truth, to which all ‘religions’ bear some kind of oblique witness, is foreign to Christianity.

The Christian Church has been arrogant at times in the way it has presented the gospel but what Jesus says in this passage in John 14 shows that such arrogance is a denial of the very truth it’s claiming to represent. The truth and the life are found in the way of Jesus – who washed his disciple’s feet and told them to copy his example of self giving love. Look at the way of Jesus the one who wept with those who weep, the one who included those who society excluded, the one who showed indiscriminate love to all. Only when we follow that way may we have any chance of being believed when we speak the earth shattering truth that Jesus spoke and proclaim that he is Lord of all.

Paul had to appear before the Athenians, the guardians of Greek culture and religion and declare to them that the unknown God was the true God who had acted decisively in history and raised Jesus from the dead and now called people to leave their ignorance behind and repent.

Like in ancient Greece there are many gods and many powers out there. Some may deceive you; even give you what you want. But they will sell you short. Jesus is Lord. He is the one who God raised from the dead, who defeated all the powers including the power of death. He has the trump card. He has the victory. Don’t settle for anything less. Metaphorically speaking ‘don’t go off with another man’s wife’!

Jesus says he will give his Spirit to guide us in this truth and help us in his way. In the last few years many people in this church have become more open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and we have seen the Spirit at work in our midst. In these next three weeks we are going to look a little closer at the gift of the Holy Spirit and what Jesus said he would do.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor questions the various reasons people give for the decline of mainline churches such as music in worship, inept clergy, or too much investment in institutional survival. In Taylor’s experience, we should look more closely at the intellectualization of the church. She believes people want, “Not more *about* God. *More God*.” From the youngest to the oldest, we experience “more God” through Spirit-filled community

where love is given free expression.

I think she is on to something. Even in our so called secular society people still have a spiritual hunger. The concern is that they feed that hunger with stuff that is not wholesome. Jesus said in john 4, we need to worship in spirit and in truth. Our spiritual experiences always need discernment and reflection and the truth of scripture, reason and church tradition all are needed to keep us anchored in the faith and practice of the apostles. What is the good way, what is the truth of reality and God, what leads to real life, eternal life.

This week we start to look at the spiritual life of a Christian.

 In this passage in John 14, Jesus says he will give the gift of the Spirit to his disciples. He has promised to send us his own spirit, his own breath, his own inner life. They will not be left without encouragement. In this promise, the text hints at the meaning of the Spirit’s gift given at Pentecost. The Spirit comes as a gift from God, just as John’s gospel earlier portrayed Jesus as God’s gift (3:16).

A definition of a Christian is not just someone who follows Jesus Christ but who has also received his Spirit, his gift, who helps the disciple follow in the way of Jesus Christ. We will look in a couple of weeks about how we receive this gift but first let’s reflect on the nature of the gift of the Spirit.

In verse 16 Jesus names the Spirit with the Greek word *parakletos*. The word could be translated as helper, or counsellor, or comforter or advocate.

The word can be translated as ‘helper’ or comforter. Comfort is a strange and wonderful thing. Have you noticed how when someone is deeply distressed, say after a bereavement or a tragedy, the fact of having other people with them, hugging them and being alongside them, gives them strength for the next moment, then the one after that, then the one after that?

Outwardly nothing has changed. The tragedy is still a tragedy. The dead person won’t be coming back. But other human support changes our ability to cope with disaster. Ti gives us strength. When the spirit is spoken of as the ‘comforter’, this kind of extra strength to meet special need is in mind.

 An equally good translation of the word parakletos is ‘advocate’. An advocate stands up in court of law and explains to the judge or jury how things are from his or her client’s point of view. The advocate pleads the case. Jesus assumes that his followers will often find themselves, as he found himself, on the wrong side of official persecution. He saw the situation, as centuries of Jewish tradition had done before him, in terms of the heavenly law court with god as the judge. In that court, his people can rest assured that their case will be heard, that God will constantly be reminded of their plight, because the spirit will plead on their behalf. (Paul says much the same in Romans 8.26-27)

A student called Steve was taking a challenging class in maths. The course and teacher were known for exacting and demanding exams. The final exam was looming, and the teacher mercifully told the class that each student would be permitted to bring in a single sheet of paper with as much information as they could put on that one sheet for help during the test. On exam day, each student came to class clutching their precious pieces of paper with as much information as possible. Some students had crammed lines and lines of font so tiny and so numerous onto that single sheet that you had to wonder how they could read it. But Steve walked in with a single blank sheet and a friend who was a senior student and who had an ‘A’ in maths. Steve bent down and placed that single, blank sheet of paper on the floor next to his desk. His expert friend stood on the paper.

The professor noticed the extra body in the room and asked what he was doing. Steve piped up, “You said we could bring in whatever we could fit on a single piece of paper for help on this test, well, this is my help and he can fit on the paper!”

He had followed the instructions to the letter and was the only student in that class to score an ‘A’ since he had his expert friend standing alongside him.

The Holy Spirit is like that friend, standing alongside us, supporting us, and guiding us.

Not a day goes by when I’m not sending up a prayer saying Lord, help me with this. What should I say? How should I act? What should I decide? Then be open to the prompting of the Spirit. He may speak through another person, through reading a passage from the bible, or give you a mental picture or word, or an inner feeling or conviction. It takes practice and sometimes advice from more experienced friends, but this is the promise of Jesus to give us the helper, the advocate, the counsellor.

Not so long ago I was having a difficult phone conversation with someone. Debbie was a whispering into my ear some wise words and thoughtful suggestions. One of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is reminding the faithful of the truth, jogging the memories of Jesus about all of his commandments so that they can keep them in love. Think of the Holy Spirit in this way, as a quiet, whispering teacher of the commandments of Jesus. Often the Spirit is advertised in flashier terms: The Spirit gives ecstasy; the Spirit evokes speaking in unknown tongues; the Spirit prompts dramatic and miraculous healings. Indeed, the Holy Spirit of God does perform such deeds, but these are all derivative of the one, primary activity of the Spirit -- reminding the children of God about everything that Jesus taught and commanded (John 14:26), whispering the gospel lyrics into the ears of the forgetful faithful.

The last three verse of this section present a wonderful circle of promises that are ours because of Jesus being with us by the Spirit. We will see him, plain to the eye of faith. We will live with this new life. We will know the deepest theological knowledge of all: that he and the father are ‘in’ each other, and that we are ‘in’ him and he ‘in’ us. And we will be joined to Jesus and the father by an unbreakable bond of love. This, in turn, lead s back to where the sequence began. He will show himself to us.

I read something rather odd the other day: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home."

The life of faith can be like that-doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like branches on the vine-or like climbers tied to the rope-tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you." I am in the Father and the Father is in me and I am in you.

We are tied together in the Spirit. Which is always difficult when some people in the church seem to be drifting away from the rest of the body because we are still in some way connected to each other through the Spirit.

One mother was trying to put her three-year-old son to bed for a nap.

When she was unsuccessful, she put him in her bed and laid down with him to encourage him to rest. She fell asleep, but he didn't. When she woke up, she saw him sitting on a chair at the end of the bed, and asked, "Luke, what are you doing?"

"I'm playing God," he replied.

"Playing God?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm watching over you while you sleep."

Children understand more than we do sometimes. God IS watching over us. Jesus gave that promise here in talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Not only will God watch over us but through the presence and reminder of the Holy Spirit, we will be reminded of what it means to "Love Jesus and keep his commands." And God will help us to create the environment of love, grace, faith and security that we need for our homes and our church today. Our challenge is to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, listen and trust our helper, comforter, advocate and guide.

**Call to worship**

Lovers of God,

draw near.

For in the sacred heart of Love

we live and move and have our being.

We leave behind the life of our days for a time

and find ourselves embraced by Spirit

who is in all and through all

and who gives life and breath

to all living things.

In this present stillness,

gathered as a community,

we realize the Spirit of Christ

is not far from each of us

and the heart of Christ beats on

**Opening prayer**

We open our hearts to one another

and, in these moments of stillness,

become aware

of the warmth, the breath, the life we share.

The Spirit of Christ abides

in the shared space between us.

May we inhale deeply of this sacred presence

and exhale words and actions of godly love.

Amen.

**Prayer of confession**

**Introduction**

*Hold the strands of ribbons during this introduction.*

We are joined together by Christ’s Spirit.

Through this joining, we know Love

and we are able to speak, and act, and be love.

These strands represent the Spirit

that joins us together.

Mindful of this Spirit,

let us be aware of the faith we share

and the strain that is sometimes part of our reality.

May we hear the heart speak with a quiet voice

inviting us to fulfill the commandment to love.

*(silent prayer)*

**Words of assurance**

*Lay the strands of ribbons on the floor around the gathered*

*community then offer these words of assurance.*

Spirit’s presence is in us, between us,

and embracing us always.

Through the unity of this Spirit,

we are shaped into a community

that lives to fulfill love’s expectations.

Christ is risen!

**Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**