

## **Easter 6A – We’re not enough but the Paraclete is Acts 17.22-31, 1 Peter 3.13-22, John 14.15-21**

I expect that many of us have had final conversations with people we’ve loved who knew that they were going to die soon. Possibly that’s been with loved ones who are ill – maybe not so much with people who are threatened with murder or execution. What we have just heard are some of Jesus’ final words to his friends and followers as they sit in the shadow of betrayal and conspiracy.

Jesus is incredibly intentional about saying goodbye. The different Gospels represent this intentionality in slightly different ways – in the Synoptics we have the symbolic blessing and offering of bread and wine as Jesus’ body and blood. In John, we have the washing of feet, and then this long dialogue and prayer that we call the “upper room discourse.” We listen in very carefully to this conversation through the Easter season, because last words are important, and because we trust that whatever Jesus had to say to those first followers he also wants to say to us, his church today.

His words are a potent mix of challenge and reassurance. Challenge, because Jesus expects those he leaves behind to carry on his ministry by fulfilling his commandment to love. He does not want them to simply return to the lives they had before they met him, but to continue in the way of transformation. The reassurance comes as Jesus explains he’s not leaving them alone to figure it out for themselves. He is going to die, but he is not “orphaning” them even though he will not be among them in the same way as before.

You can imagine the degree of fretting in the room as Jesus is speaking. They can all see the storm that’s brewing, the night that is about to fall that will envelop them all in terror and sorrow. There’s probably a fair amount of denial too, as they wait to see what rabbit Jesus will pull out of a hat to snatch victory from the jaws of failure. But he keeps talking about leaving them, and you can sense alongside the denial this growing anxiety that Jesus responds to.

Putting myself in their shoes, I sense the disciples wanting to say, “how will we cope without you? You’ve made us realise there’s this whole new way of being, this connection with God that has changed us in ways we can barely describe – and now you’re talking about going. We’re afraid for you, and we’re afraid for ourselves. What if we stuff it up? What if we can’t find in our own hearts what we’ve discovered through being with you these past years? You’ve opened our eyes to a new world, a glimpse of incredible possibilities and we’re so scared that once you’re dead it’s all going to end and we won’t have what it takes to be in the world in the way you’ve taught us. You’re saying that you want us to love and forgive and keep your commandments but what if we can’t?”

I wonder if we’ve experienced this level of worry about having what it takes to do God’s will, or even just to live from our values and be the person that we know God sees and invites us to become. I wonder if you’ve ever found yourself saying “I can’t! I don’t know how!”

It has become a common thing to say to people experiencing this kind of anxiety “remember, you are enough.” It’s well-meaning, and somewhat helpful, because sometimes our feeling of deficit is imagined or has been unfairly imposed on us. But to be honest, often our sense of “not being enough” for a situation or challenge is actually just true. Our worry of not being able to carry the day in our own strength is based in reality.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey has this to say about those times when we are fretful about fulfilling our calling as Christians: “The answer is a deep, sparkling well of truth, which is Christ himself, and from it our fears are washed away and our thirsty spirits are refreshed.”

This well of truth, this access to Christ’s loving presence, is not a memory or something that we bring into being through our imagination. It’s not just a nice idea that we think about, or that comes into being mentally when we read the words of Scripture.

It is a real, active, transforming, healing and guiding presence – the *paraclete* or “advocate,” “ally,” “comforter,” “strengthenener,” “counsellor,” that Jesus promised his Father would send to be with the disciples after his death.

Jesus talks of the Father giving the disciples “another” *paraclete*, meaning that he was the first. And this “other” helper is *his living presence through the Spirit* – no longer in physical human form but no less real for that. It is through the felt presence of God in their hearts and among them in the Spirit that the disciples will be enabled to love each other, and therefore fulfil the command of God which they were unable to fulfil on their own.

And so we see that the disciples who betrayed and denied Jesus and scattered and hid themselves away, through the strengthening presence of the *paraclete* become the church that proclaims boldly in public places, giving up earthly possessions for the poor, and seeing in Jesus’ rising from the dead the beginning of the New Creation in their midst. The Spirit of truth takes up residence within them, enabling their witness and ultimately taking them to live in God through the life of the risen Christ.

I’ve heard it said that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not in the empty tomb, but in the risen presence of Christ in the community of disciples. The hallmark of this presence is love – “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” (John 13.35)

Left to our own devices we struggle to love the way God asks us to love, to forgive “seventy times seven,” to pray for our enemies, to give up our possessions so that others may have enough, to lay down our life for our friends.

Humanly speaking, this kind of love is impossible for us – we have evolved as a species in certain ways, and been taught by our society, to look after ourselves and our own needs first, to put our family's comfort ahead of a stranger's survival, and to reject those who hurt us. We can't help letting fear and scarcity and in-group thinking lead us into selfishness.

But in our baptism, we have been given the Spirit just as Jesus promised, the voice of conscience and the mystical presence of God's own energy of love that urges and strengthens and enables us to love beyond what our natural instincts allow. Every day, in every moment, we have an opportunity to practice love. To choose charitable thoughts and words toward those who frustrate us, to show patience to those who annoy us, to offer prayers for those who dismay us, and to confess when we get it wrong. And every clumsy, halting step like this is amplified and made holy by the presence of the One who loves us to the end and will abide with us for ever.

*Listen to "If ye love me" Tallis, and open our hearts to the presence of love, the presence of the paraclete in us and in our midst.*

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St John's Royal Oak, May 2026