

We Are Invited to Sit at Table...

... as part of the Divine Relationship

A reflection given on Sixth Sunday of Easter, 17th May 2020, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly in the Online Service

John 14:15-21

Have you ever been asked that question where you're told to imagine hosting a dinner party and you're allowed to name anyone from history or current times, dead or alive, as your dinner party guests? Do you know who you would choose? There are usually some favourites among the list, Gandhi, Churchill. Maybe even as we've been celebrating the International Day of the nurse this week, Florence Nightingale. Perhaps at the moment you'd be happy to be able to invite anybody over, or perhaps particularly your extended family or friends. But it's a fun thought experiment, isn't it? When I've been asked this question in the past, I've sometimes said, "Jesus" - I'd just love to be able to see Jesus face to face and to talk with him over the dinner table; so many questions; the things you could ask him. And I think he'd be a pretty good dinner party guest, too: I seem to remember he liked a good meal with friends.

I suppose if I'm honest, one of the thoughts behind having Jesus as my dinner guest is, 'Wouldn't be so much easier if Jesus were here now in front of me?' And it reveals almost a kind of jealousy in me for the 'face-time' that the disciples had. But as others have pointed out, this idea that having the physical Jesus in front of us is somehow easier, doesn't actually seem to be borne out by the gospel accounts: the disciples often had great difficulty understanding Jesus; they misunderstood what he was trying to do; the disciples ran away from the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested; Peter denied him; Thomas doubted; even when the disciples were with Jesus on the Emmaus road, they didn't at first recognise him. The list goes on - it seems that even when Jesus was standing right in front of the disciples, he was often an enigma to them. Left purely to our own understanding, our own senses and our own intellect, it seems we would still struggle to understand him.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus promises to ask the Father for another advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with the disciples and us forever. He's promised to send his own spirit, his own breath, to be with us forever so that we will never be on our own.

The word translated as 'advocate' in today's reading is 'Parakletos' and can be and has been translated many different ways. One possibility is 'Helper'. We have been promised someone who will give us the strength to get through each day to help us be a witness to God's love in the world, even when perhaps we don't always feel like it: to love as we've been loved.

However, the Holy Spirit isn't simply our fifth emergency service, an equivalent to the AA helping us to keep on motoring. He's more than that. Another translation is 'comforter'. One of the difficulties that people have talked of in the current lockdown is our inability to physically hug one another, even when we need that hug the most. A hug from a friend can often be what we need to get us through even the toughest situations.

Jesus promises us his spirit as that 'Comforter'. But the word we heard in today's reading was 'Advocate': someone guiding and directing us, but also able to speak on our behalf; who explains our situation to others, to the Father; and perhaps even being our legal defence counsel when we fall short. We're told elsewhere that Jesus continually intercedes for us. That is what we're being promised here, an ever-present advocate working for us on our behalf.

We are inherently relational beings. We're made to interact and to interplay with others. In some of our Minster 'coffee and chat' zoom meetings, this is what some have said they find most difficult. They simply miss being with other people, mixing and talking with others. The emerging picture of the Holy Trinity in today's gospel passage, shows us that God is inherently relational too. It's Jesus who asks the Father for the Holy Spirit to be sent to be with us: in verse 21, he says, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me. And those who love me will be loved by my Father and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

There's almost a dizzying circle of relationships being described here. The most amazing thing of all, though, is that through the promise of the Holy Spirit, we aren't simply being asked to be spectators of Jesus and God the Father, we are being invited into that circle; to be in direct relationship with him.

You may have seen it before; possibly you've even spotted it on my shelf during our Facebook live midday prayers, but there's an inspiring and thought-provoking picture of the Trinity by Rublev: it depicts God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three

people sitting around a table having a meal, in relationship. But one of the most wonderful things about the picture is that one side of the table is left open, on the viewer's side, on **our** side, suggesting that we are not simply spectators at the feast, but are being drawn in, being invited to sit at the table as part of that divine relationship.

That is the amazing truth of today's passage. There actually **is** a dinner party. It's not imaginary. And rather than just dreaming of inviting Jesus to **our** table, God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is inviting each one of us to sit at **His**, to be part of that divine relationship defined by and revealed by love.

At a time where we may feel cut-off from others, it's good to remind ourselves that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are never cut off from God: as Jesus tells us, "I will never leave you orphaned."

Reading Texts

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."