

# Do not be afraid ...

## *...welcome and honour the Holy Spirit*

---

*A sermon given on the Sixth Sunday of Easter - 25th May 2025, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Wallis, in Beverley Minster*

*Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29*

The context for our gospel reading today is that it's not very long before Jesus is crucified, and he is trying to reassure his disciples that things will be okay, even when he is no longer with them physically. It's hard to believe that, when you are faced with losing someone you love - grief is heart-breaking and the loss of a loved one builds a hole which cannot be filled. But death is a reality of life - we are never ready for it; we never want it - and that is quite human. But Jesus knew what was coming; he knew about the awful death and the cruel trauma that he would endure; he knew about the fear that his friends would face when the enemies of Jesus turned against him; but he also knew that his death would fundamentally change the way that people experience the God who loves them. In some way, he is excited for them. The writer of Hebrew says, *"For the joy set Before him, Jesus faced the cross."* There was something about what the cross would achieve that brought him joy - he tells them that once he is gone physically, they will not be orphaned; they wouldn't be left abandoned without a parent, but to those who love him and keep his commands, they will experience something new.

Have you seen the great picture called Rublev's Icon? It depicts three characters sitting around a table and each one leaning towards the other. It represents the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It speaks of that intimacy and closeness which each of the characters, the persons of the Trinity, have towards each other and how they are interdependent on each one. At the front of the picture there is a gap and that gap speaks of an invitation for the viewer to join in this communion - it's a place for you and it's a place for me at the table of the Trinity. So that picture is a picture of the reality of what God offers us.

Now, Jesus's death brings the incarnation of God open to you and to me. Jesus told his friends that the Father and the Son will come and make our home in you, and he said that the Holy Spirit, who is the love between the Father and the Son, the third person of the Trinity, will be your teacher, your advocate, your comforter, and will be the reminder of all the things of God. (I don't know what you think about this, but it's such a mystery, isn't it? Almost too wonderful to believe and accept that God would make his home in human beings.) What did it mean to the disciples? And what does it mean to us today?

The passage that we read in the scripture was Jesus's response to a question that one of his disciples asked him, and this was, *"Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?"* And that's a valid question - why do some people accept and believe the words of Jesus, and some people don't? We do have a choice how we live our lives: we can live with God or we can live without Him. The Bible says that faith comes from hearing, and how can they believe unless they have heard? And some people just have not heard about the love of God in Jesus - and that is our responsibility as Christians. (I was brought up in the church and for 23 years I sat in a pew and I did not understand what the gospel of Jesus meant and how much God loved me - and that's our responsibility.) But many have heard and still it has no

impact. When we look at the sky and we see the glory of God in nature, we are made to worship. But some choose to live lives independent of God, and our society is mocking of such dependency on God. It seems to me that we have little place in our secular world for mystery, and God is mystery. The author C. S. Lewis wrote that 'God is both further from us and nearer to us than any other human being.' The theological words for this are transcendent and immanent - so God is both far away, supreme, sovereign, and all powerful; and near, so close to us, knowing us intimately, knowing our character, our our failings, our life's experiences and yet in the knowledge of that, still unconditionally loving us and being merciful to us.

The question is, have you experienced this immanent God in your lives? Do you sense the indwelling of the Father and the Son making his home in you? Do you sense the direction of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding you? Do you have that peace which Jesus offers, that sense that no matter how it looks in your life, the Lord is with you and he will strengthen you and hold you - because that is the promise of God to all who receive it.

Now, we get very confused about the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. But just as the disciples had Jesus in the flesh in front of them to teach them and to remind them of all things, so to those who say 'yes' to Jesus, he sends his Holy Spirit to be our advocate. An advocate is one who speaks up and defends us, our comforter, our counsellor, our reminder - the wisdom of God who leads into truth. Do you know this voice of the Holy Spirit? At the moment we're listening to a book called *Dirty Glory* by Pete Greig, the founder of the 24/7 prayer movement and he's talking to a friend about how to tune into that voice of the Holy Spirit - and yes, we do it by reading the Bible, by reflecting, by worship, and elsewhere, Paul calls us to pray unceasingly - I wonder how possible that is - and this speaks of an ongoing relationship and a dialogue with the Holy Spirit in the everyday things of our lives. I think we get confused here and somehow we think that we can only involve him to help us with the big things. But I think he's more interested in that relationship and so in things like difficult meetings, even losing keys and finding car park spaces, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us. Have you experienced a time when the Holy Spirit was prompting and leading you to do something in your life? Sometimes He speaks through other people (I have known that many times - the reason I am a vicar today is because he spoke to several people in dreams and visions and words); sometimes he speaks when we read the Bible; sometimes through the lyrics of a song; sometimes when we're in nature; sometimes when we are washing up; sometimes when we ask somebody to pray for us, he speaks through them.

The secret is to be expectant and in tune. And, to ask - before you go in to that difficult meeting, or when you are feeling low - I believe he truly wants to be involved in all the instances of our life because the Holy Spirit's job is to help you to live out the message of the gospel and to guide you in what you do. It's all about love in action; it is not just a theoretical belief system.

In the reading from Acts, we have a brilliant example of how the Holy Spirit worked in the early church. This is where we come to Lydia (I named my first child, Lydia, because of this lady) - little is known about her: she was a successful businesswoman, a trader in purple cloth; she was a Gentile living in Philippi in Macedonia which is the northern part of Greece; and she was a worshipper, somebody whose heart was open to the living God and seeking to learn and receive; and here we have Paul, that great man of God, building up the first church among the Gentiles, performing miracles, being persecuted.

So we have Lydia and we have Paul, and we have God sending Paul. How did he do it? - through a series of improbable events orchestrated by the Holy Spirit: first of all earlier in Acts, we read about the whole controversy of whether Gentiles were received into this new revelation; then we have the spirit blocking the disciples from going to certain towns like Bithynia and so they end up in Troas; and there Paul had a dream about a man from Macedonia saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'; and when he was there Paul was then led to a river, and there he met Lydia. - What a series of events that the Holy Spirit had to orchestrate before Paul was in front of Lydia!

And that's how the Holy Spirit works - God knew she was searching, and he loved her so much that he interrupted the grand plans of Paul so that she could hear the word of God, she could be baptised along with her family. And this faithful woman became the centre of hospitality and evangelism in the region of Philippi - one woman! Don't you think that is how God works in the hearts and minds of one person at a time who is open to him? (I love how John Wesley was converted - it just says that on hearing the gospel, his heart was strangely warmed. There was no great Damascus-style conversion for John Wesley, but a simple, strange warmth - the warmth of the love of God being impressed upon him by the Holy Spirit, who is very gentle and very humble.)

And so in all of this what might the Lord be saying to you and to me today? Could it be that you are not orphans, that he is with us? Could it be that there is a teacher who if you ask and listen, will guide you in your life? Is it, do not be afraid? Is it, receive my peace - that shalom of God that depending on your circumstances, reassures you that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is there, living within you? Is it just simply trust me, that I am at work in your life - you might not recognise how? But just like in Lydia's life, how God was at work, I often think it's like a chess board: He's arranging the pieces; He sees your heart; He positions people and circumstances so that you would know Him more.

So honour and welcome the Holy Spirit. Do not be afraid.

# Reading Texts

## Acts 16:9-15

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

## John 14:23-29

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.