

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

The long Easter season is coming to an end, as we have celebrated and basked in the delight of the resurrection of our Lord for six weeks, but we now need to ready ourselves for his departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It has certainly been a rather strange sort of Easter for us all and will be one we certainly won't forget in years to come.

One of the delights of the Gospel message is its pure simplicity. Faith is essentially simple, we just seem to be very good at making it far more complicated for ourselves than it needs to be. I am not sure if I have spoken to you before about Karl Barth or not? He was a swiss reformed theologian who towers over 20th Century Protestant theology like no other. In brief, Barth did his best to kill off 19th century liberal theology and pretty well invented neo-orthodoxy to replace it. He did this, as the best theologians all do, by writing the *Church Dogmatics*, a collection of volumes which are nearly one million words in length. It would have been longer, but Barth died before he'd finished, probably from extreme writers cramp (well maybe not). So you can imagine what sort of a man Barth was, his sermons were probably even more boring than my own.

Near the end of his life Barth was lecturing at the University of Chicago. At the end of a lecture, a student, presumably who had lost the will to live and was hoping for a quick answer for his exams asked Barth to summarise his theology in one sentence, to which Barth said "In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'" Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Twelve words that said it all really, makes you wonder what the other 999,988 were for!

In our Gospel reading today we get a similar simplicity, Jesus says 'if you love me, keep my commandments,' easy. We actually don't need to know anymore really. The message is actually very, very simple.

After a long transition the parish of St Swithun's in the Marshes appointed a new rector. After the first Sunday, the rector stood at the back and a number of people commented to him about what a lovely sermon he had preached. On the second Sunday, the congregation were really rather eager to hear what the rector had to say. Rather to their surprise, he delivered exactly the same sermon. On the third Sunday, he delivered the same sermon again. By this point the congregation were getting a little agitated and asked the Churchwarden to have a word with the rector. 'Father, much as we've all enjoyed your sermon, when will you be preaching a different one?' to which the rector replied, 'when you've done what I've asked you to do in the first one.'

The point is the gospel message is very straightforward, we're just really rather terrible at following it. In our Acts reading today, Paul in speaking to the Athenians makes mention of this, in recounting the history of creation, Paul says of humanity 'that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.' God is close, he is with us, but we somehow fail to see it, and end up stumbling around blind to it.

Indeed faith is made all the more simple by the gift of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus speaks about as 'another Helper, to be with you forever'. We will not be alone Christ tells us, we have the Holy Spirit, and yet we still seem to fail miserably.

I think the problems we face in the Church so often come down to our failure to see the simplicity of the message of the Gospel. the question I think we need to ask really, is what is stopping us from following the Gospel. I think we are all a bit like the congregation at St Swithun's in the Marshes, we simply don't listen. We stumble around following 'the devices and desires of our own hearts' rather than taking the time to pause and listen to the Lord's call upon us. The message of our Gospel today is, I think one of patient waiting, Christ is telling his disciples to wait for the coming of the Spirit. It is a call to wait on God, not to think we can do everything in our own strength but to simply wait and listen. It reminds us of the words back in Gethsemane, 'remain here, and watch with me'.

As the restrictions begin, slowly but surely to loosen, there is a temptation to simply jump back on the treadmill of life and continue where we left off. I really don't buy into the idea that society will change all that much after the lockdown, companies may streamline themselves a bit, and working from home may increase a little, but otherwise I think we will simply but surely slip back into our old routines and habits. The only real opportunity for change comes from the same place that it always has done, faith in our Lord and Saviour alone. If we want to see lives transformed then the place to look is to Christ alone, which means we need to be firm in the simplicity and truth of his message. We can only seek the transformation of ourselves, of others and of society through listening, through opening ourselves up to Christ in our lives and by putting down all that distracts us from that. So as we prepare for Pentecost, I think it is worth remembering the ancient call of the Church 'Veni Sancte Spiritus' 'Come Holy Spirit', to with quiet patience listen and wait for the Holy Spirit, asking the Lord to guide us to Him and Him alone.

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