

If

Acts 17:22-32; John 14:15-21

In our gospel reading it is surprising but telling that it is largely dominated by three little words:

If

With

In

Whole worlds, whole lives can and do turn on the meaning of these little words as Jesus speaks poignantly to His followers in the upper room on Maundy Thursday. He has shared His Last Supper with His closest friends and disciples. His betrayal by Judas is at hand. He will soon set out to the Garden of Gethsemane, and will be arrested, tried on made-up charges, beaten, scourged and crucified. He has less than 12 hours of his human life left. Coming to the end of His earthly ministry He can only speak of the love He has lived amongst them as the goal He prays will be part of their lives. The God Jesus knows so intimately as Father will continue to accompany all of His followers through the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, which means 'Advocate, Helper, Counsellor', Who will also continue in the role of go-between for the people of earth and the Kingdom of Heaven.

Hoping that somebody would remember, and somebody would write down, even if it was years after the event. Jesus speaks.

"If you love Me..."

That's a big 'if'. The word "if" is a conjunction used to introduce a conditional clause, expressing a possibility or condition that must be met for the main clause to be true. It has been used in English since before C12th. But here, when used by Jesus, it is not a threat, but a promise. *"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments."* These commandments, what are

they? Essentially they are all commandments of love: to serve each other, to be compassionate, to live in communion with one another, not to judge or condemn but to forgive, to love enemies, to live the beatitude blessings, to wash each other's feet.

The commandment of Jesus is that we love one another as He loves us. This is His *way*, it is the *way* of God. We are called to leave behind all the selfish attitudes of the world, no longer to put all our energies into the pursuit of power, wealth, honour and superficial friendships. It implies struggle, moments of grief, and clearing out and reordering our priorities given what we face in life. This building and rebuilding in order to make our lives a place where God will live. It takes time - a whole life-time! *"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments."*

"With..." is another of those small words upon which worlds and lives will turn. The proof that Jesus is not laying down conditions, He is attempting to inspire trust amongst those who follow Him. He speaks to assure, not to threaten. We will not be left on our own once Jesus leaves the world physically. The Holy Spirit is coming, and will remain. *"...to be with you forever..."* Through all the upheavals of our lives, here is the fulfilment of Jesus' promise, *"I will be with you always"* - through the Spirit.

I have often wondered why it is that when we crave stability and certainty and calm and a pattern we can follow, upheaval comes. At times of peace, war simmers away, erupting and disrupting. In times of social and economic uncertainty, rather than political stability with a clear push to the wellbeing of all, we see political upheaval. I am left wondering in last week's election results - are these signs of wanting a radical change to what has been the status quo? Is what we are seeing across the country a vote 'for' something? Or is it simply a vote 'against'? Time will tell, as policies enacted will tell if the needs of our country will be met. Will it see the keeping and realising of God's commandments for the community?

Wherever we stand in these days, God's Church still remains, and the Spirit of God remains *with* us. The love in action Jesus wants His followers to embrace is not an abstract philosophical concept but a lived reality. God as Father, Son and Spirit *with* us means the hungry should be fed, the sick healed, a society of tolerance and inclusion must be established, compassion and ethical behaviour must be the norm. Instead of power as domination, Jesus invites those who meet Him to use power for the well-being of the entire community. This is when we work *with* Him, because the way He wants us to behave and act, from the least to the greatest, is with that broad-sweeping love that touches every aspect of human life. If Jesus is with us, are we with Him? If the Spirit is with us, are we with Her?

If

With

In

The last little word in this gospel passage is the word, '*in*'. This tiny word that seems as if it should not matter all that much. Nevertheless, here is Jesus, promising to be '*in*' the people who keep His commandments. As for His earliest disciples, are the ways of Jesus, the practice of Jesus, the work of Jesus '*in*' us? Are we, the successors of those first disciples, operating as the active presence of expansive, gracious, outward-facing Christian principles in our community today? Can people outside the Church see inside the Church because they encounter people like us? Are we clear windows through which the love of Jesus can be seen, or stony walls behind which the love of Jesus is hidden?

One of the things I have noticed again in the life of this congregation is the place we hold, perhaps to our surprise, within the hearts and lives of many in our community. The Umbrella campaign for me is not simply about raising money, which is good, it has actually raised the profile of

Morningside Parish Church in our area. It may not translate into a surge of new members, but people, against the current climate of Church closures across the country, are seeing that if support does not come, our future here is uncertain. We provide something for Morningside that few other organisations can or do. The Morningside Hope project is not simply about helping people who live with dementia, and their carers. It has been about showing the community that here, in this Church, there are people who care. Who provide music, games, exercise, art, and concerts which draw in so many more people. We have gained new members through the loving witness of Morningside Hope. It says to our world, here is a congregation that cares. The same is true for our support of the Edinburgh Clothing Store, and the South East Edinburgh Foodbank, and Fresh Start, and the other compassion-driven groups we support.

The existence of this building provides a sheltering presence for other groups who help people of different generations to gather together, for help, for healing, for fun, for education, for music. A Morningside Youth Choir is planned to start in September, which will meet on our premises, aiming to share the gift of music with the Primary Six to Secondary Three age group.

The fact that the Spirit of God is in us, and in this place, active, prompting, unsettling and frustrating at times, but present and moving and inspiring, is evidence, clear evidence, that the Spirit is in us. The Advocate, the Helper, the Counsellor is in this place because She is in You, and things are happening because of that presence lived through your lives.

You may not feel always holy, or special, or saintly. Yet through what we represent, and provide, and work towards, things for good are happening through our Church in our community. Not for us to boast or brag about, but for us to be grateful for, and to continue our support and our involvement.

If With In

If you love Jesus, you will keep His commandments. Then you will be aware that the power of God's Holy Spirit will continue *with* you. For the presence of the lived-out-loud reality of practical, compassionate, imaginative and committed Christianity will be *in* you, and in the Church and in the community we are called to serve and help and love.

So we continue. So we persevere. So we look up and look out. So we embody the truth of the Jesus at the heart of our faith.

If With In

Where do these little words play their big part in our lives, and in the life of this Church?

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

Amen