

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 17th May 2020



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Spirit of truth, come close to us. Unite us into the body of Christ.

Enable us to worship God in Spirit and in truth.

Help us to support and encourage each other.

Help us to love as we are loved.

Spirit of truth, come and abide in us.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Acts 17 v22-31 (p113) In Athens

Psalm 66 v8-20 (p581) Shout with joy to God, all the earth!

1 Peter 3 v13-22 (p1219) Suffering for Doing Good

John 14 v15-21 (p1082) Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit

The Spirit Beside Us

This week our focus is on the connection between loving Jesus and keeping his commandments.

Jesus promises his disciples that God will send the Spirit of truth, who will be with them for ever. He reminds them that those who love him are those who keep his commandments. These are the ones to whom he will reveal himself.

In the reading from Acts, Paul delivers a sermon about God the Creator, who should not be pictured as needing human care, or as made of gold, silver or stone, or as resembling any product of human imagination.

This is 'Monotheism 101' – a guide to the basics of Jewish, Christian and Islamic belief about the nature of God. What is surprising is that Paul explains this without any direct reference to the Scriptures. He begins with a polytheistic altar as a visual aid, and quotes two Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus (v28). This sermon shows us Paul's nimble mind; more than that, though, it shows his absolute confidence that the gospel he has to share is for everyone, not just those who share his culture and background. In many ways it is already everybody's story because God is 'not far from each one of us' (v27). Paul shares the Gospel side by side with pagan people, not looking down on them from a great height of superior knowledge, but as a fellow human being.

And the first fact about Jesus that he shares? God raised Jesus from the dead.

The writer of 1 Peter evokes the pattern of suffering experienced by Jesus as a template for dealing with the readers' own suffering: if you suffer for doing right 'you are blessed'. He speaks of the attitudes needed when under pressure: 'Keeping a clear conscience' and speaking 'with gentleness and respect'. Yet the pattern is not completed with a description of the crucifixion. And it continues with a comment that after his death, Jesus was 'made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago'. In some churches, this is understood as 'the harrowing of hell' – i.e. Jesus descends to the place of the dead and releases those held there throughout the centuries. Alternatively, one could understand these verses in tandem with Jesus' words: 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Matthew 16 v18). The underlying message is that nowhere in the cosmos is beyond the reach of Jesus: not even the place of the dead.

The theme in this speech by Jesus, in the Gospel reading, spirals back round to the centrality of love. Loving Jesus becomes evident when we obey his commandments, the central one of which is to love as he has loved us. To help us in this, Jesus will ask the Father to give us another 'Advocate' who will be with us for ever, who is also called the Spirit. The Greek word translated 'advocate' literally means the one 'called to your side' and could equally be translated 'intercessor', 'counsellor' or 'intermediary' – and probably by a number of other words too. It is the word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament for the comforters who came to Job, so one could add a positive version of 'comforter' to the list. When Jerome was translating the New Testament into Latin, he felt that the term was intentionally broad and inclusive,

so instead of choosing just one word and therefore one meaning, he simply turned the sounds of the Greek word into Latin, giving the term 'Paraclete'. The Paraclete is the one who guides, counsels and consoles us, and speaks up on our behalf. Crucially, the Paraclete will never desert us in our hour of need. This speech then flows on naturally from discussing our relationship with the Paraclete to discussing our relationship with Jesus and with the Father. The kind of mutual indwelling that Jesus describes (e.g. 'he abides with you and he will be in you', and 'I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you') makes it clear that our relationship with the Paraclete is not something distinct from our relationship with Jesus and the Father, but is all bound up in that oneness with God that ensures we are not left orphans.

The links between the readings

These readings encourage us to remember that God is always with us. God is near us and beside us, by the very fact of being the creator who longs to have a relationship with us. Jesus has passed through death, and even those who have been held by death are liberated by him. Jesus promises the indwelling Paraclete - who will come to be beside them for ever – to his disciples.

A Sending Out Prayer

Go in peace to live in love,
to show God's love,
to receive God's love
– everywhere, and at all times.

Amen