

Sermon 22 May 2022

John 14:23-29

Jesus continues his farewell discourse to his disciples. This is taking place after the Last Supper. The Last Supper itself was all about acknowledging the end and at the same time, looking forward to a future for the disciples without Jesus in their midst in physical form but also a future with Jesus in spiritual form. The sacraments of the bread and wine embodying the spirit of Jesus and instituted at the Last Supper is a prime illustration of that.

In the same way, in this passage Jesus talks about leaving the disciples but at the same time, being with them. *'I am going away, and I am coming to you.'* He is referring, of course, to the Holy Spirit. The point is this, Christ is always with us. This is the whole point of the Resurrection. It didn't all come to an end with the death of Jesus. On the contrary, it was the beginning of a new relationship. It is a relationship manifested and expressed through the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus refers to. *'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.'*

In two weeks time we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. Jesus is forecasting this coming. He is making the point that he will always be with us, albeit in spiritual form. But that is real; that is meaningful; that should give us a sense of comfort and even empowerment when the chips are down. I say 'when the chips are down' because I believe that is when we become really open to God's presence. I believe that it is when we speak to God in our hour of need, when we speak to God from the bottom of our heart in the throes of our anguish that we create a state of mind that is receptive to the presence of God. Certainly, from a personal perspective, that is when I find myself drawing closer to God.

Some of you will remember the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, a scandal that enveloped President Nixon and several of his advisors. One of those advisors was a man called Charles Colson. While in prison, Colson underwent a remarkable religious conversion. He picked up a Bible and he read from Hebrews how God had sent Jesus into the world to live among us as a brother and so help us with our relationship with God. *'Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to be in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God.'* Hebrews 2:17.

Colson spoke to God in his anguish and pain; he spoke to God from the bottom of his heart, and he experienced God. After his release from prison, Colson founded a programme called Prison Fellowship. It became nation-wide and involves Bible-study seminars that are attended by thousands of prisoners. It provides material and spiritual assistance to the families of prisoners, as well as counselling for both prisoners and their families.

The story of Charles Colson and his prison ministry illustrates an important point that Jesus makes with his disciples in our Gospel reading. His disciples were troubled and afraid when they heard that Jesus was going to leave them. They found it impossible to imagine life

without Jesus at their side. How were they going to manage? What good could possibly come from Jesus being absent from their lives? Well, Jesus tells them that he would not leave them without help, but would send the Holy Spirit to guide them. And look what happened! They started our Church! It doesn't get much better or bigger than that.

We all have times in our lives when we are faced with challenges that seem insurmountable; when God feels a million miles away and has even abandoned us. That is the time when we have to draw on our faith and reach out to him with conviction, speaking to him from the depths of our heart. He is there for us. His Spirit is never far away, just lurking and waiting for us to connect with sincerity and good faith.

I want to finish by making this point. In these words of Jesus, there is a call to service. He says, *'Those who love me will keep my word.'* How do we keep his word? Very simply by enacting the power of love; by becoming involved in helping others. Charles Colson heard that call, and look what he achieved. The disciples heard that call, and look what they achieved. Jesus wants us to hear that call and do what we can do make a difference in the lives of others. If we can do that, even in a small way, we can rightfully call ourselves disciples of Christ, because let's not forget that Jesus address us all when he addresses his disciples.

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