

You'll be better off when I'm gone...

Sermon preached at Holy Trinity Guildford, Choral Evensong, 20 October 2019

Trinity 18 – Readings: Nehemiah 8:9-end, John 16:1-11

It's perhaps hardly surprising that Jesus has to try 5 times in John's gospel to convince his disciples that they'll be better off when he's gone. There's something deeply troubling about anyone saying that – you may have had the experience of someone saying it to you, either in an angry argument as a relationship collapses, in the exhaustion of trying to disentangle things with a partner or a colleague who's resigned...worst of all, you may have heard it from someone you love who is facing the end of their lives, who is trying to put a brave face on the most difficult of circumstances, and yet trying to urge you to carry on.

"You'll be better off when I'm gone."

One of the difficulties we face with John's gospel is that everything always sounds so detached, so carefully thought through. But if we look beyond the theological craftsmanship of the writer, to the situation on the ground that is being described, then that line from Jesus "It's to your advantage that I go away" must have cut his disciples to the quick, like the sharpest of knives slicing through their emotions.

How can Jesus possibly say that life is going to be better for his disciples, his closest friends, when he's no longer with them?

What Jesus is doing is pushing them towards a time of transition. And the trouble is that for the disciples, as for all of us, transitions – especially when they take the form of being separated from the people we love – those sorts of transitions suck. We don't like them, we don't want them, we would do anything to avoid them, and we can't see any possible advantage in what's going on. No matter how much we're told "it will be good for you", we simply don't believe it.

But now, think back to a time when you've made a new start, either deliberately or because you've had to... When you've changed jobs, changed schools, maybe moved house, started at a new church, maybe *this* church... When you've taken up a new challenge, a new sport, or something creative... And try to imagine the before and after stage for a minute: before you did those new things, the old life, the way things were, was all you could imagine. Whereas now, well now it may well seem as

though you can't remember *not* being at the current school, in your present job, in what was a new house a while ago, but is now simply "home"...

We are complex beings, and the way that we relate to past, present and future is complicated too. We grapple with all sorts of emotions when standing on the threshold of the future, longing to hold onto the familiar strings of the past... We may well feel that the last thing we want to do is take the next step.

And that's *exactly* where the disciples were – but Jesus explains to them: if you *don't* let me go, if you *don't* prepare to live your lives independently, without my physical presence, then the next chapter will *never* be able to get started. The chapter that begins when I, the earthly Jesus, your friend and companion, disappear...and I give you my Spirit in my place.

Now of course, one of the challenges we can imagine the disciples having with this is the idea that real, earthly, physical Jesus, the man, their friend, will be no more, and that something intangible, invisible and mysterious – the Holy Spirit – really will come in his place. And even if it does, what exactly is it going to do, and how will it work?

Perhaps the point Jesus is trying to get across, and which the disciples are struggling to grasp, is something about faith, and something about scale.

All the while Jesus is with them, the disciples' experience of God's presence is locked in space and time – a small space, centred around Galilee and then Jerusalem, and a short time. We sometimes like to ask ourselves questions like "how different would it have been if Jesus had simply died of old age?" Well, a little digging suggests that the average life expectancy in the first century Roman world was around 35-40 years old. So never mind old age, the likelihood was that Jesus' earthly life, like that of many people, would have been seriously curtailed by whatever means.... The limits of space and time were very finite indeed.

Which brings us back to Jesus' point: if things go the way he is expecting by now; if, however the details work, he's going to be handed over to the authorities and killed, that will become the gateway for something bigger to happen. Rather than marking the end, actually it will be the beginning. The Holy Spirit will come, , and this is going to test the disciples' faith to the limit. But the Spirit will come, and will rest upon each of them, and unlock in each one of them far more possibility for transforming the

world around them than could ever happen all the while they are simply following Jesus around the countryside, ok, witnessing extraordinary things, and asking questions, but above all, feeling safe and secure in the presence of their friend.

Sometimes taking the next step in life, growing up, moving on from all that has gone before, involves taking a brave step. And yes, says Jesus, to really grow up, you need, effectively, to “take ownership” of your own life. Your own discipleship. Your own faith. Enough of simply following me around like sheep, now let me give you both challenge and reassurance of a different kind – it’s still the reassurance of my presence, but not locked in the space and time of C1 Palestine: I am with you in your *own* time and your *own* space, today, now, and for the future. Wherever you are, whatever your life looks like, however well organised or chaotic, however consciously or otherwise you connect with God, I am with you.

The work of Jesus, both in the world and confronting the world and its wrong-headed values, goes on in the lives of each one of us. I wonder, at the start of a new week, what thresholds you are standing on? Where the Spirit will take you? And what revelations await you as you take the next step on your own – on your own, but never alone...

Amen.