

THE 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER or EASTER IV, Year C

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul listed the fruits, the evident results, of the Holy Spirit active in the life of a person. He placed love as the first of those fruits: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace," and so on. (Gal.5:22) And again in that familiar 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, he wrote: "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love." (13:1 &13) Paul was simply stressing again the direct commandment of Jesus morning's Gospel Reading: "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another." (v.34)

The occasion was the Last [Supper](#) Judas Iscariot Had just left to betray Jesus, and John records Jesus opportunity to glorify the Father: "Now glorified, and God has been glorified in Him." And in that moment of intense awareness of His coming passion, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus gives to the disciples the new commandment: "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

Jesus had said to them earlier: "I shall not be with you very much longer and you cannot go where I am going." At first reading or hearing we might think that the disciples were to be excluded or prevented from following their Master to be with the Heavenly Father! Three years earlier, Peter, with his brother Andrew, and James and John, has been called by Jesus to leave their nets and boats and follow Him. Now Jesus was saying that they could not follow Him any further. It seems odd. But since all this took place before the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we must understand that the disciples could not possibly realize that Jesus meant that He was returning to His Heavenly Father. That understanding would only come later. Peter pressed Jesus more closely though, in the subsequent verses of this 13th chapter of St. John's Gospel: "Lord, where are you going?" and Jesus softened the shock of His earlier words: "You cannot follow me now, but you shall follow afterwards." (v.36) We know, with the advantage of being able to look back on these early days of the formation of the Church, that there was work to be done by the Apostles, before they could follow their Master to the Father. In the Gospel a fortnight ago we heard of Peter's commission for the work to which he was called: "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep." We hear in the words of that commission the loving concern of Jesus for His flock, those who follow Him, the Good Shepherd. And we know that Peter and the other apostles did minister to the flock of Christ with that same loving concern.

Loving concern must still be the outward sign and indication that the Church, and each individual member of the Church, is faithful to our Lord and Saviour. Indeed it is commanded of us. Yet it is not something we can easily create in ourselves, an attitude we take up when we decide to be a Christian. We might be able to act that way for a while, as people outside the Church may do, but it soon melts away under the heat and pressure of anger or jealousy or self-seeking. True Christian love, that loving concern of Christ, is the outcome of responding in faith to the grace of God whereby the Holy Spirit is given the opportunity to become active in the individual life of a follower of Christ, and in the corporate life of Christ's Holy Church.

It was once said, admiringly "See how these Christians love one another!" It was a distinguishing mark of the early Church. A more modern commentator said the same words sarcastically at a time of inter-Church rivalry and conflict: "See how these Christians love one another!" - a scathing indictment, sadly all too true very often.

Two true stories to illustrate the point.: A young mother took her restless infant to church each Sunday. An elderly man always sat about two pews in front of them. Every time there was a bit of a commotion the old chap would screw around to see what was going on. Regrettably the mother saw in his attitude, disapproval, and she would pick up the child and rush out of church in tears. People tried to console her, to explain that it was only curiosity which made the old man look around - but actually it was an attitude of "Why don't you control your child?" Many parents don't take their children with them into church for fear of similar criticism. And people ask: "Where are the young people?"

The second incident is happier. An elderly widow who was not an Anglican, felt let down by her own Church during the sickness and subsequent death of her husband. Someone knowing her plight asked the Rector of the Anglican Parish to visit her and he did so, and invited her to worship in his Church. She was welcomed warmly by members of the congregation, and became a regular worshipper, and participant in the Church's activities. Actually, the Church is St. Philip's. Somerton Park, although this incident occurred some years back. But what a difference that loving concern makes.

It is unfortunate that, so often, the reputation of a congregation, or indeed that of the Church as a whole, is wrecked by thoughtlessness of just one or two members of it. The Parish Priest - of course - is in the box seat in this regard, for should he speak without thinking, or overlook somebody, or forget to acknowledge some activity or other, then people may be hurt, upset, or turned away. It is not often recognised that the ordinary pew-sitter can have the same effect. It is terribly easy for you to deter some timidly shy person who really wants to become a Christian but does not quite know how to start. It is a scary responsibility!!

Of course some people are looking for an excuse to avoid what they know they should be doing. Such people will always be able to find a way out. We must be careful that they are not able to blame us. On the other hand, we must always be extending compassion, understanding and concern - not only to those inside the congregation but also to those outside. This is real evangelism. You might be able to talk a person into going to Church; you may even pick them up and bring them with you; but if you are not exhibiting the fruits and results of the Holy Spirit in your life, then hypocrisy is what will show through.

None of us are yet perfect. So we will make mistakes and be misunderstood. And now and then, we will deter people and they will be put off. This is to be faced, admitted and repented. The only cure is to open our lives freely to the power of the Holy Spirit, so that He may work in and through us. 'By this shall everyone know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Amen

THE-6th SUNDAY OF EASTER, or EASTER V, Year C

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

Have you made your Will? That is a document declaring how you want your material possessions disposed of after your death - whether to your children; to the Church; or to the local cats home, either in total or in various degrees of sharing out. Not only is a Will a business-like, sensible matter of arranging the disposal of our assets, but there is a good feeling of knowing that when we are finished with them, our savings and our possessions will help some people or institutions which we care about. And we hope that we will be fondly remembered.

Most of us haven't all that much to leave, but the desire is strong to leave something worthwhile behind. We desire to leave something which will remind others that we have been here, have achieved something, have lived this life. No doubt we would all prefer to be remembered lovingly, not for material gain, but because of the person we are.

Jesus left behind no material goods as far as we know. We don't know if or how He disposed of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth and His tools of trade: perhaps He sold them just before He left home for ever, to provide money for His mother to live on when He ceased being the provider. Or maybe another member of the family took them over. We just don't know.

He left behind no manuscripts, no written documents, no property, no earthly treasures. In fact Jesus appears to have had nothing much to leave behind - at least not in the way the world generally thinks, about these things.

The major difference between the things we might leave behind and the things Jesus left, is that He knew precisely what His contribution would be. There was no doubt or uncertainty in our Lord's mind as to what He would leave. "This is why I came," He said to His followers on that first Palm Sunday, as He faced the certainty of crucifixion (John 12:27) It seemed so simple and obvious to Jesus that He should know not only the course of His life but the result of it.

What then was Jesus' legacy? Firstly, the assurance of the Father's love; secondly, the promise of the Son's continual presence and the peace that brings; and thirdly, the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide His followers.

On the way to His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples to be happy and at peace. Do you remember that bright and catchy modern song, popular a few years back with its repeated phrase: "Don't worry: be happy"? It doesn't work! No matter how often you tell yourself or someone else "Not to worry - she'll be right", you or they just cannot lay worry aside simply as an act of will. Nor can you make yourself happy by saying over and over "I'm happy!" - It was in the context of trouble to come that Jesus gave His disciples the assurance of His peace. And I'm sure that those men were very worried about what lay ahead. This should help us to see that -mere outward tranquility is not a guarantee of real peace and happiness. Christ's, peace is a settled state of heart and mind which is not affected by a person's circumstances, and which outward conflicts and worries cannot destroy.

The disciples can be at peace, because Jesus says He will continue to be with them through His Spirit. His presence will always remain a source of life and will strengthen them against the-powers of sin and selfishness. He speaks of His destination: He is returning to His Heavenly Father. And He says that if His disciples really loved Him, they would be glad that it was so. He was being released from the limitations of this world; He was being restored to His glory.

If we really grasped the truth of the Christian faith, we would always be glad when those we love go to be with God. That is not to say that we would not feel the sting of sorrow and the pain of loss. But it is to say that, even in our sorrow and loneliness, we are glad that after the troubles and the trials of earthly life, those whom we love have gone to be with the God whose children we all are

When we read the accounts of Jesus' life, and consider the treatment meted out to Him in His last hours particularly, we cannot fail to see the reality of His peace. And this peace He offers to those who follow Him - a course which involves facing the demanding terms of discipleship, and accepting the sometimes irksome circumstances in which life has to be lived. But it is in just this kind of situation that the reality of the precious gift of peace can be proved.

This precious gift is not just the absence of trouble, nor a fuzzy cosiness which comes from refusing to face reality. Rather it is the awareness that Christ is active and present in our lives, and this awareness brings peace. It is harmony and union with God and with our neighbour. There is no problem - spiritual, social, or ethical - that cannot find its clear solution in the teaching and practice of Jesus as recorded in Holy Scripture. There are certainly difficult outcomes caused by wrong answers and responses to problems of the past. Jesus Himself came up against such things and suffered because of them. His responses again are worth turning to. The Holy Spirit will not lead us to some radical kind of reaction, but to the divine revelation which Jesus proclaimed. And it will be an obedience which will bring peace.

There are times of crisis in all our lives, times when a vital decision has to be made. We should be calling on the guidance of the Holy Spirit daily as a matter of course. But we should also call for His assistance especially when we have some serious decision to make. There are times in the lives of many of us when we are tempted to doubt about what we are called upon to believe, or to hesitate about what we are called upon to do. On those occasions the help of the Holy Spirit is especially necessary. He will not fail us if we turn to Him earnestly and sincerely, and our frets and fears will fall away:

The disciples were tempted to cling to the past, those safe and secure days when Jesus was walking with them in the flesh. Christians cannot cling to the past either, no matter how comfortable memory makes it seem. Instead we must trust Christ that the unknown future will be even richer as we grow in faith and understanding. After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was made known to them, there was no way the disciples would have wanted to return to the days of the earthly ministry of Jesus, wonderful though they were. It was only as they went forward in faith that they found life so much more enriched.

So too will we discover this truth of the great legacy of Jesus: the assurance of the Father's love; the peace which the presence of Jesus brings; and the guiding of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end."

From the Nicene Creed.

The Festival of the Ascension of Christ raises difficult and unanswerable questions for us about life after death - what will it be like; what will we be like; where will we be; and so on. . Consider this story: A court jester was once called to the bedside of the King to amuse him in his sadness. The jester's irth however, failed for once. His best quips drew no corresponding smile from the King's pallid face. "Master", said the jester, "why so sad?" "Because", replied the King, "I have to leave my home and my people and go on a journey." "Is it a long journey?" asked the jester. "It is indeed; the longest journey any man or woman could undertake." "When are you going?" enquired the clown. "I don't know for certain, but I think it will be quite soon now." "And what of your majesty's preparations?" continued the jester. "I see no clothing laid out, no boxes in the hall, no horses in the courtyard." "Alas! was the reply, "You speak the truth. I have had so much else to occupy me that I have made no preparations for departure." "Then take my cap and bells", said the bold jester. "I thought I was the court fool, but I see there lies here a greater fool than I, since he is going on the longest journey man ever took, and yet he calls me here to beguile his precious moments with jest and tale, instead of preparing for his travels."

Rather a good story, and a telling one, for those who believe that there is a journey of supreme importance when this life is through. Of course some people do not believe this. It is recorded that the great philosopher, Bertrand Russell used to say: "When I die, I rot." Though apparently on his death bed he asked a Christian layman to pray with him!

Christians of course claim to believe in life after death. We affirm that belief every time we say the Creed: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Coming right at the end of the Creed, it is usually said without much conviction or enthusiasm, instead of the declaration of a great and glorious truth! When it is said half-heartedly it may reflect an uncertainty of belief, which might be found in many folk who would be insulted if there was any suggestion of their - not being Christians!" .

The matter is a difficult one, for no ordinary human being has been down into the valley of death and come back to tell us with clarity what it is like "over there".

In the Bible, the Old Testament has little to help us. There is a great deal about "going down into silence" where there is no praising of God, nothing to look forward to. We find an almost desperate stress on the desire for continuity of the family line - Father will die and that so far as he can tell, will be the end. So he must ensure that his life is continued in his children and grandchildren. This desire for continuity through the family accounts for much of the horror attached to infertility. For a woman to be barren - and they knew little about male infertility - was the greatest curse she could have. And that is partly why it was O.K. for a man to have several wives and concubines if he could afford it - to ensure that his and his forefathers' spirit was continued.

The period between the Old and the New Testaments was one intense distress for the Jewish people. They were persecuted, and killed in great numbers. And many were put to death just because they refused to give up the practice of their religion and to abandon their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Where then was the God of justice and love? Why didn't he do something about the appalling events happening to his people? And as they wrestled with this problem - the justice and righteousness of God, and the sinfulness and cruelty of man - there began to emerge a doctrine

of an afterlife, of a heaven and a hell. True it was often a pretty crude picture, and sometimes there was ugly colour of vengeance about it. But it was an attempt to face a problem and find a satisfactory answer.

In the New Testament we have a purified and developed doctrine, found in the attempt at working out the ways of God with respect to mankind. And even with our Christian understanding, many of us still are having to work through our belief. After all, *are we all going the same way?* Did Idi Amin and Mother Teresa have the same destination? If they do, what does that make us think God is like?

In the Apostles Creed, used at Morning and Evening Prayer and in the Baptism Service, we affirm our belief in life everlasting. This term has a strong note of continuity of existence about it. Not the continuity of the body which has for some time with some kind of efficiency. That will return to the elements from which it was created. That is only the temporal, earthly part of us. 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. When a Christian speaks of everlasting life, what is meant is much more than a continuity of living. It refers to the **quality** of life, the quality of a relationship with God, which having begun and been nurtured in this life, continues and flourishes in the next.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that it is possible - more than that, that it is the will of God for a person to enter into a relationship of love and trust with God through Jesus Christ. And as a member of his Church, to grow in grace and knowledge. "To as many as received him," wrote St. John, "to them he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12) To live in that relationship with God, to nourish and develop it by prayer and sacrament and service, is to enter into Life. That living relationship cannot be terminated just because the body of the believer is tired and worn out and has to be cast off. In a way which it is not possible for us to imagine, the life will be continued on in the next stage.

It is at this point that language and imagination let us down. What exactly will heaven be like? Holy Scripture tries to depict it in language that would be highly significant and meaningful to its original readers and hearers, if not so much for us. There will be no sea¹ - the Jews were not a seagoing people and hated it. There will be no sun to burn and desiccate - they lived in a climate that could be cruelly hot. The streets will be paved with gold - they were mostly very poor. It will be like one great city - they needed the security of community life. And so on.

What **can** be understood universally is the kind of thing that St. Paul says when he speaks of the Christian destiny as being shaped to the likeness of God's son, Jesus. For the Christian that process is going on now; our characters are being moulded now in a Christ-like way. True, there are many hold-ups and setbacks, and often the process seems disappointingly slow. But Heaven, according to this way of thinking, is the state where the process goes on without hindrance.

Or we may think of the way St. John in his first letter put it: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2) That is heaven - we shall be like him. And to be unlike him is hell.. Imagine a person who has no thought for God, no love of God, who has never worshipped or served him - imagine such a person being ushered into the burning purity of God's presence! That would indeed be hell! We shall **see** him; we shall be **like** him; we shall be **with** him - the continuation and the deepening of a relationship with the Father. If the promise Jesus made to the thief dying on a cross next to him is true - "Today you will be with me in Paradise" - then death is not the end. It is a new beginning of

¹ In John's Revelation (and elsewhere,) the 'sea' represents evil - human evil, So *there is no longer any sea* is a statement of enormous impact!

unimaginable possibilities. It is the doorway to the life of the world to come; to life everlasting.

AMEN

WHITSUNDAY or DAY OF PENTECOST, Year C

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

On the Eve of Passover, at the Last Supper, Jesus tried to prepare His disciples for the grief ahead, and for the confusion they would experience as they came to terms with His death and resurrection, and their subsequent role as Apostles. "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever.- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you." wrote St. John. (14:16 &17)

Sometimes we say that Whitsunday (the traditional English name for today) or the Day of Pentecost (the Jewish name for the 50th day after Passover) commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. But that is not strictly accurate. The Holy Spirit did not come into the world just when Jesus left it, like sentries changing guard. But He certainly made Himself known on the Feast of Pentecost in an unmistakable way, as we heard in the first Reading this morning. In the Old Testament writings, and even more so in the New, we who have a later revelation can see the Holy Spirit at work, Although perhaps the early writers did not know Him as such, we have references to "Wisdom" as a living entity for instance, where probably later writers would say "the Holy Spirit". In the same way today people are influenced by the Holy Spirit even without recognising Him.

It seems a bit strange that the Holy Spirit and His work are not better understood - maybe people think that this is something mysterious, theological and even a magic-y way of explaining theological difficulties. And it is mysterious and theological because everything to do with God is mysterious and theological. But it is certainly not magic-y.

We ought to know the Holy Spirit from three main sources: from the Bible; from our own life and experience; and from observation of the lives of others.

In the New Testament we find Jesus teaching His disciples about the Holy Spirit; we find St. Paul speaking and writing about Him; and other disciples doing so too. We also find the Holy Spirit making Himself known directly, as on the Day of Pentecost.

In our own lives we know the voice of conscience - troublesome at times when we would like to be a bit naughty, helpful at other times when we are having a real battle against temptation. Through our conscience and other influencing means, the Holy Spirit is always at work in us, turning us from wrong, stirring us up to do good, guiding us in the perplexities of life, if we will let Him, offering us strength to cope.

We have all read and heard of great and good men and women who have made great discoveries and great sacrifices in the service of their fellow men and women. We perhaps know people who in their smaller spheres have spread goodness and kindness and self-sacrifice and Christian witness all around them. All of them, famous or not, show us the Holy Spirit at work, for it is by His inspiration that they do such things.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit influences and uses people for His will even without their knowing it, and great discoveries in fields like medicine and science are made at times by non-religious people because they have placed their whole being at the service of their vocation, and God has used them. Likewise we can shut out the influence of the Holy Spirit by selfishness and pig-headedness.

It is not easy to distinguish between the Holy Spirit, His influence; and the power that He gives. So we speak of "receiving` the Holy Spirit", and of "receiving grace from God" which really mean the same, for "grace" is the touch of the Holy Spirit, His power working in us. It is the favour which God shows to His people, and St. Paul writes: "It is by grace you have been saved" -- meaning, by God's favour and kindness. (Eph.2:5)

So as we think of the Holy Spirit, we must also think of His power offered to us - offered, not forced upon us: we are free to accept and co-operate, or to reject it. But if we want to line ourselves up with God - and our presence in church implies that - we have to know how to be sure of receiving grace. There are a number of ways, and all require our own decision to open ourselves to God's influence, for we can do no good thing without it. Paul said: "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." (Phi1.4:13)

As we say our prayers, private and public; as we read our Bibles and other religious books; as we think and work and give in God's service, we are making ourselves open to the Holy Spirit and His gift of grace. And because we are so easily distracted in these things, God has provided other guaranteed channels of grace and placed them in the care of His Church. These are the Sacraments: Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Holy Matrimony, Holy Unction, and Absolution. Not all necessary for all people,- only Baptism and Holy Communion are that, for Jesus declared them as essential. But all are available as needed. God's guaranteed channels of grace to help and strengthen us in drawing nearer to Him in every aspect of life, and day by day through life: And they are not automatic or magical ceremonies and formulas. When those who receive the Sacraments do not recognise their need of God's grace, the Sacraments become to them mere formalities - the most obvious being weddings because it is "nice" to be married in a church, or christenings because somehow the water of baptism sticks the name onto the child. Incidentally, regardless of the parents' attitude, the child is made member of the Body of Christ, a child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of God a heavenly Father, although its spiritual life may be stifled by its unbelieving parents.

Similarly, we must examine our approach to Holy Communion, and sure that we do not come simply to be seen and known as a church goer. There may be less people attending church these days, but there are far less now who come because it is the 'done thing, ' or to display fashions, or for any other superficial reason. .

Our religion is to draw us into a living relationship with our God, through Christ, and this is possible only in the power of the Holy Spirit. As we try to become more loving, more obedient, more disciplined, more Christ-like, so the Holy Spirit is aiding us and giving us the power to do so. Whitsunday is not just a day when we recall a historic manifestation of the Holy Spirit in an upper room in Jerusalem a long time ago. It is a day when we are reminded that the Holy Spirit is in the here and now, desiring to work in us, and through us, and to draw us closer to our Heavenly destination. and now, desiring to work in us, and closer to our Heavenly destination.

AMEN