

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, Year A Sunday May 1st, 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on the Gospel for the day viz. John 20:19-31]

"Jesus said to Thomas: Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (Jn.20:29)

Because of Thomas' slowness and unwillingness to believe the good news of the Resurrection, he has been known from that time as Thomas the Doubter. It's a bit unfair, like so many labels we put on people, because, after all, the other disciples themselves had come to full belief only because they had had the experience of seeing the Risen Christ, on which Thomas had missed out.

It is a pleasant thing to be the bearer of good news, to be able to tell somebody that something fortunate has happened, or to reassure someone in distress or anxiety that their troubles are over, and to see their face light up with joy and happiness because of what we have been able to tell them. Only one thing can spoil the pleasure of telling good news, and that is when the person to whom we give it does not respond as gladly as we expected. The commonest reason is that they already know and have already got over their excitement. Or the person might not believe what we say. Or occasionally you strike one of those gloomy people who seem to prefer to hear bad news rather than good.

Thomas' reaction to the exciting news of the Resurrection of Jesus must have been like a bucket of cold water to those who so joyfully told him! Why he reacted this way, we do not know. Perhaps it was too much for him to accept, after the trauma and tragedy of Good Friday. Perhaps he thought they were mistaken about what they claimed to have seen. I doubt that he thought they were deceiving him or pulling his leg - that would have been a pretty poor joke. But probably they would have been a bit annoyed with him for his cool reception of their joyful news.

Whatever sharp words might have been said, and whatever strained feelings there were, the other disciples remained patient with Thomas, and he with them, for when the disciples met on the following Sunday, Thomas was with them, joining in the worship and in the talk about the incredible happenings of the previous Sunday. Again Jesus came, and this time because he was present and saw Jesus with his own eyes, Thomas was satisfied and believed. The patience the rest of the group had shown towards Thomas, and he towards them, had been rewarded.

Here is a direct rebuke to those of us who become impatient with others in the congregation who are so slow to see things our way; so slow to believe as fully and devoutly as we do; so slow to give and work for the Church as we do. We must **learn to accept such reluctance and** wait patiently for full conversion to dawn. It is not easy, but think how frustrated the other disciples must have been because Thomas just could not share in the fullness of joyful believing.

The role of the Apostles was that they were to be the foundation of the Church. There were many more followers of Jesus than just this small handful, of course - St. Paul in detailing some of the post-

Resurrection appearances mentions Jesus appearing to 500 disciples on one occasion (1 Cor.15:6). But the Apostles were the leaders because they were witnesses to all that Jesus had said and done. When it was thought desirable to fill the gap in the ranks of the Apostles, left by Judas Iscariot, the conditions necessary to be chosen as one of the inner group were stated by Peter: "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of the resurrection." (Acts 1:21, 22)

The writing of St. John's Gospel, which recounts the incident of Thomas and his disbelief, is thought to have been towards the end of the first **century**, when most of the Apostles were dead. In telling the story no doubt John wished to reassure the Christians of the second and third generations that their faith was as valid as those who had **been** physically present. Their faith was of necessity based on the witness of those who actually saw, heard, and touched the Risen Jesus. He also wished to assure them that their faith was in no way inferior to that of the first disciples. It was the same faith, though based on different signs and witnesses. They could be sure that in receiving the apostolic witness transmitted within the Church, they were in living contact with the Risen Lord. And this is why in **the** Creed we declare our belief in the "apostolic Church" - that is, the Church holding to the faith taught by the Apostles. This too is the basis of the Apostolic Succession to which the Anglican Church, with others, holds close. Not only do we look to Holy Scripture for the record of the story of mankind's redemption, but we have the living, unbroken chain of reassurance transmitted down the ages. No priest is ordained except by a bishop, who was himself first ordained a priest and later consecrated a bishop by at least three other bishops, themselves having been properly ordained and consecrated, and so on, back to the very first witnesses of the Resurrection. That does not mean that errors or mistakes of teaching and belief do not creep in - history records many terrible happenings taking place from time to time, and the worst of sins have been done in the name of the Church. But in God's providence these are corrected in due time as faithful men and women hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Today's Gospel reminds us that our faith originates in Jesus' resurrection, which was witnessed by the first disciples and transmitted to succeeding generations. We have not seen the Risen Jesus as those first disciples did, and yet we know that He has risen because we accept the apostolic witness, and have our Lord's assurance that we are blessed in so doing: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

"Seeing is believing" people unthinkingly say. The first disciples believed because they physically saw Jesus. We do not see Jesus in that same way - and yet there is a sense in which we must see Him if we are to believe. In hearing or reading the testimony of the Apostles we do not simply accept their words blindly: we know them to be true; we see them as true. We meet the Risen Jesus today as really as the first disciples, only, the conditions are different. For them the signs were His actual appearances. For us the signs are the Church and the Sacraments ministered by His Apostolic Church. We become aware of Christ's nearness and can "tap into" His strength and power as we open ourselves to the influence of the Holy Spirit. We reach beyond the outward and visible signs to the reality of Christ Himself, and by this

contact with Him, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, become like the first Apostles, His witnesses to the world.

AMEN

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based mainly on the Epistle: 1 Peter 1:13-25] "As he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, **'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'**" (v.16)

Peter was quoting from a very old book of ecclesiastical law: Leviticus, in chapter 11, allegedly written by Moses, quoting God as saying: "I am the Lord your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy, for I am holy." Children of God, so long ago and later in the 1st century AD and in our own time, are called to be holy because their Heavenly Father is holy. You would think that by now we would have got the message, and that the world would by now be responding to this call for holiness! But holiness is an individual thing, and each individual child of God must seek it for himself or herself.

All too often the Christian ethic is taken to mean simply be kind, be helpful, and don't do naughty things. Those attitudes are important, but they are the outward and visible signs of living a holy life. Today we are reminded that our Christian vocation means much more than good relationships with our fellows. Unfortunately the "being good" and "being kind" aspect of Christianity is often taken to be the total sum. And because **anybody** can be good and kind if they put their-mind to it, popular opinion says why bother with Church if that is all there is to it? Why bother about the problems of theology: God becoming man; Jesus being raised from the dead; life after death; differences of understanding between the Churches, and so on. It would all be much simpler if indeed that was all there was to it: just to be "good".

The advice in the Epistle was originally written to members of the Christian Church exposed to the threat of persecution. It was important that they should earn the goodwill of their rulers and neighbours. They should show that Christians are good members of the community and of the State. Their Christian grace and fortitude should stand them in such good stead that they could accept injustice when done to themselves, as Christ Himself did. The persecutor, knowing himself to be in error, and knowing that he himself would hit back under the same circumstances, could not but be impressed by the firm determination of the persecuted Christian not to be goaded into retaliation. Willingness to tolerate injustice to oneself without complaint is a special vocation for the Christian, but he must speak up on behalf of another under such circumstances - that is Christian responsibility too, and should be done without regard for reaction against oneself. Not an easy thing to do, and many of us fail in this area, but nevertheless, it is the principle for us and we must follow it as best we may. Jesus is not only our guide and inspiration, He is also the pattern by which we must endeavour to conduct our lives.

When Peter wrote his letter from Rome in about AD 64, the whole Christian Church was under threat of persecution. Even their holiness of life could not dispel the suspicions and distrust of their neighbours. The Emperor Nero had made the Christians the scapegoats for the burning of Rome, and it is probable that Peter himself perished in the subsequent mass executions. But before it was too late he took this opportunity of warning and encouraging the Church. He urged them not to give the pagans any

reason to complain of their conduct, or to condemn them for any breach of the law, but at the same time, if they are called upon to suffer on the sole ground of being a Christian, they should regard that as a high honour.

As he wrote, Peter called to mind the events of the Crucifixion. As Jesus hung there on the cross, silent and uncomplaining, one of the criminals being executed with Him tried to find relief from his own suffering by taking it out on the one who hung beside him. Jesus offered no answer to those insults, but ministered to the other thief who, even on the cross, sought comfort from Him.

When Peter writes about following the example of Christ, he speaks in particular of the fact that in His suffering, Jesus never retaliated, but showed abounding love. "When he was abused he did not retort with abuse; when he suffered he uttered no threats, but committed his cause to the One who judges justly:" (2:23) This was His way of victory. When we are injured or wronged, if we retaliate the evil spreads: it becomes worse, more difficult to resolve and to restore harmony. If we show love, turning the other cheek, the sting of evil is drawn: it cannot spread, it is contained, and good can flow from it. Good out of evil. This is the way of Christ: it was His way of victory on the cross.

Jesus came to reveal God: to show us God in terms which we can understand; to translate God into human terms. We might say: "What good is that to us? Surely we are not expected to live as God! How can the divine be an example for human beings?" Peter's advice is: "Discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when He is revealed. Be holy as He is holy". We are not being directed from a distance; our Guide is going just ahead of us. We are to imitate His actions and place our feet in His footsteps. And Jesus did not say: "Imitate me", and then go off back to heaven and leave us floundering along. Otherwise the life of Jesus would be well-nigh meaningless. It would be like trying to play the violin by just watching Yehudi Menuhin on television. As the message of Whitsunday will remind us in a few week's time, Jesus promised: "The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you."

What we have to do is to look for and thankfully receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - that power which enables us to be holy. God is holy and therefore we can be holy also, because His Spirit is with us. He promises us new life, new love, new vigour, new resolution. With the victory of Easter still strong in our minds we know that the strength of the Risen Christ will support us through joy and through grief, through happiness and through suffering, to the ultimate bliss of heaven.

"You shall be holy, for I am holy."

AMEN

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A Sunday 15th May, 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

[Based on today's Gospel passage viz. John 10:1-10]

Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) In today's Gospel we have presented to us two pictures related to sheep, shepherds, and would-be sheep stealers. They lead on to that more famous passage where Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd.

But first Jesus speaks of the recognition of the legitimate shepherd as against the thief. In those days, when flocks were small, the shepherd walked ahead and called the flock to follow, which they did like pets. At this stage Jesus does not specifically identify Himself as the legitimate shepherd - that comes later. The question now being raised for Jesus' contemporaries is: "Who is the true leader and ruler of the true people of God? Who has the proper authority to include or exclude a person from the society of God's chosen people?" No doubt Jesus intended His hearers to be reminded of references in the Scriptures which condemned the leaders of Israel as unfaithful shepherds. Jeremiah for instance says: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for His people: You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed., neither shall any be missing, says the Lord." (Jer.23:2-4) And Ezekiel: "Thus says the Lord God: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings: but you do not feed the sheep." (34:2-3) "Thus says the Lord God: Behold I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." (34:11-12)

So when Jesus spoke of the thieves and bandits who enter the sheepfold not by the gate but by climbing in by another way, He was attacking those leaders of Israel who were not being faithful in their God-given responsibilities as leaders of His people. Later in John's Gospel, Judas Iscariot is called a thief, and Barabbas is referred to as a robber, so we may also read Jesus as rejecting the attempts of people like Judas and Barabbas to force an armed uprising to establish a worldly materialistic messiahship. The alternative picture is that of the genuine shepherd who enters the sheepfold in the proper way - this could well be a reference to Jesus' credentials as a descendant of David. Jesus was setting out His own claim to be the true shepherd of the real people of Israel. The true members of God's true people will recognise Him as their true leader, the genuine shepherd that He is. They know His voice. The plausible authority of strangers will not trick them. "They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." (v.5) The true shepherd exists and exercises His authority, solely for the good of the sheep, while the thieves and bandits think of the sheep only in terms of what they can get out of them for themselves, for their own well-being, or perhaps power

or status. To enter the sheepfold by a method other than by that used by Jesus, that is, to exercise an authority other than His, is to act as a thief and a bandit - to force people's service, not win them to glad obedience. Then Jesus changes the metaphor, and says that He is the gate itself. "I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." (v.9) -It seems that in our Lord's day, in order to protect the sheep out in the fields at night, they were led into a protective circle of thorn-bushes. It had no gate, as such, but the shepherd would sleep lying across the opening so that no sheep could get out and no predator get in unless over the shepherd's body. This metaphor - "I am the gate for the sheep" - teaches us that it is through Jesus alone that we may have entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Others may have partial insights into eternal truths: Islam and Buddhism for instance, but Jesus alone is the gate leading to the presence of God. It is Jesus alone who gives us security. Through Him the sheep "come in and go out and find pasture." "Going in and coming out" was a Hebrew expression for going uninterruptedly about one's business. So in Deuteronomy the promise was: "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out." (28:6) It is the promise in Psalm 121: "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore." (v.8) Here is the promise of security, through Jesus alone. Through Jesus the Gate, the sheep - His followers, His people - go in and out and find pasture. The hunger and thirst for righteousness can only be satisfied in and through Jesus Christ.

And then the passage switches back again to the contrast between the Good Shepherd and the thieves and bandits. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (v.10)

St. John records Jesus several times making the claim that He came into the world to bring us life. In chapter 3 we read of Him saying: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him." (3:36) In chapter 5: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." (5:39,40) In chapter 6: "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life." (6:33 & 35) No doubt there are others.

But what is the life Jesus offers? Not merely prolonged physical life here on earth surely? If it were perhaps more people would be interested in Him! Others would say "I've had enough already"! No, He offers us spiritual life, life for the soul. We are all too feeble or too slack to put up much of a fight against temptation and sin, or to give God our full devotion and service, unstintingly. We sorely need what Christ came into the world to bring to all who would receive Him - we need life. Contrasted with the thieves and bandits who come to break in and destroy, Jesus comes to give life, abundant life. He said: "I am the gate" - the gate which leads to the knowledge of God; to security and peace; to the fulfillment of our deepest desires; to that life which is real life.

AMEN

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A Sunday 22nd May, 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

Jesus said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no-one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him." From this morning's Gospel Reading. (John 14:6,7)

Today we have more of our Lord's "I am" sayings. Last Sunday Jesus said of himself: "I am the gate of the sheepfold; I am the good shepherd." Today we hear him say: "I am the way; I am the truth; I am the life." Each claim would have been full of significant associations of ideas and promises to the Jewish people who heard them. They were claims to divinity and equality with God, and were undoubtedly remembered later by those who levelled the charge of blasphemy against him, at his trial.

Moses the Lawgiver had laid down that men must not turn either to the right or to the left, but must walk in the way which the Lord their God had commanded. It was Moses' fear that the people would turn aside from the way which he had taught them. He said: "I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you." (Deuteronomy 31:29) Later Isaiah heard God say: "This is the way, walk in it." (30:21) The promise was a way of holiness in which nothing or no-one unclean could exist, and which was so clear that not even a fool could go wrong in it. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein." (35:8) All through the Old Testament the prophets and the wise and holy writers spoke of the way or the path of life, and called mankind to it.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the new and living way which Jesus opened for us to the presence of the Father. And St. Paul writing to the Ephesians spoke of the access that both Jew and Gentile have through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to the Father. But the claim of Jesus goes beyond any of these sayings, however great they are. He did not say: "I show you the way," yet many people today see Jesus as merely a great teacher. He did not say: "I open the way for you" as a superficial reading of Holy Scripture might suggest. He said: "I am the way." We can direct a person to a destination with careful and detailed instructions - how often has someone given you directions ending: "You can't miss it!" Even with a map a person can get lost. Best of all is when someone says: "I know the way, come with me, and I myself will take you there." That person has become the way. More than that, Jesus did not only tell us the way; he did not only give instructions about the way: he is the way and in him no-one can fail to find his way into the presence of God.

Jesus said: "I am the truth." There are several aspects of the word "truth". In the psalms, God is spoken of as a God of mercy and truth - fidelity, reliability, trustworthiness, faithfulness. It is truth in the sense in which a lover will say: "I will be true to you." In this sense it means that Jesus is fidelity incarnate; that we can completely and unhesitatingly and without reservation rely on him. He is the one person in the universe who we can trust in the certainty that we shall never be let down by nor disappointed by. We think of truth as distinguished from falsehood, meaning that which is real and genuine as opposed to that which is unreal and counterfeit. In Jesus we come face to face with truth and reality. In him we penetrate beyond the „ guesses and the uncertainties, beyond the perhapses and the

maybes and arrive at the TRUTH. We pass beyond the counterfeits and the substitutes, the imitations and the shadows, and arrive at REALITY.

St. John's Gospel goes further. There, truth is not simply something intellectual, it is also something which is moral. It is not merely something to be known, it is also something which is to be done. So Jesus speaks about doing the truth "He who does what is true comes to the light." To say that Jesus is the Truth is to say that Jesus is the incarnation of fidelity, the revelation of reality, and the pattern of goodness.

Jesus says: "I am the life." We can apply this claim of our Lord's to the physical life. In the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, in the Gospel reading for Christmas Day, we read: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of men." The Word-made-flesh, the Son, was in the beginning - "the Word was with God and the Word was God." Through the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, long before he became man, physical life was brought into the world. But Jesus is not only the co-creator of life; he is also the re-creator of life. He brought life in the beginning and he came to make eternal life available. We must be clear_ in our understanding of what Jesus is offering us when he offers us eternal life. Obviously eternal life must mean more than life which exists forever. The mere extension of life-in-time could be a curse and not a blessing.

Quality of eternal life must enter into it, otherwise we would have the possibility of an infinite prolongation of a painful, frustrated, defeated life which would be much nearer hell than heaven. Eternal in this sense means far more than "everlasting": "everlasting" has to do with measurement of time. The contrast is as between God and man; as between heaven and earth; and the only person to whom "eternal" may be properly applied is God. So eternal life is life in God. The life that Jesus brings to man is the life of God. Jesus is the bridge between God and man. And this is just what Jesus meant when he said: "No man comes to the Father but by me." Through him mankind can enter into the life of God himself. Only in union with the Son though, can anyone come into any kind of union with the Father: in this physical life anyway - what happens to unbelievers after death is a matter of conjecture and we must leave that to the mercy of the Father.

So the disciple's access to God is not some future event awaiting us when we die, and a worry in the meantime in case we might miss out. It is a present possibility and reality. To acquire this access, to become truly a son or a daughter of the Heavenly Father all we have to do is to enter into the understanding of what is offered in Jesus, and accept it wholeheartedly. The kingdom of heaven has already arrived in Jesus, but it is not yet fully established in us. Our task is not simply to wait patiently for God to bring about his rule in the world, independently of us. It is to live and behave in the way shown perfectly by Jesus. As he reveals God to us as Father, so at the same time he reveals to us our true destiny: to become children of our heavenly Father, loving as Jesus loves us and in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Sixth Sunday of Easter Year A Responsibility Canon Barlow Sunday 29th May, 2011

“I will ask the Father and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive.” *John 14: 16-7*

Today’s Gospel reading carries on almost straight from last Sunday’s passage. In chapters 14, 15 and 16, St. John sets down a great body of our Lord’s final teaching and encouragement and promise to the disciples, given according to John, on the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. After Judas had left the company, and before the rest of them went out into the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus endeavoured to give reassurance to those who were to carry on His work. ‘I have told you this,’ He said, ‘ so that you will not go astray ... so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.’ Previously, Jesus had said things like ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’ and ‘if you love Me you will keep my commandments. ‘I am the true vine; abide in Me and I in you I a person does not abide in Me, they will be cast forth as a branch and wither.’ ‘When the Counsellor comes, Whom I shall send from the Father, He will bear witness to Me.’

The term ‘Advocate’ as in our text, is a rather limited word, used here in translating the word Jesus Himself used. It, of course, refers to the Holy Spirit. The original word really means ‘someone who is called in to give help.’ But it is the reason why the person is called in that gives the term its distinctive meaning. Such a person might be called in to be a favourable witness in a court of law. He might be called in to give expert advice in some difficult situation, and so the word ‘counsellor’ is used. He might be there to offer encouragement and strength when people are depressed and discouraged: so the word ‘comforter’ is used. All of these terms, (and there are others,) throw light on the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, Whom Jesus promised the disciples, to enable them to be His body, the Church, carrying on His work of healing, teaching, uplifting, encouraging people so that they might receive salvation and eternal life.

People talk about being able or not being able to cope with life's problems and situations. That is precisely the work of the Holy Spirit - the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Comforter, the Guide, the Helper, the Strengthener, who is sent by Jesus to enable his followers to cope with life and its problems and grief and pains. But we have to be open to him - the Holy Spirit is no gate-crasher into people's hearts and minds - he waits to be received and accepted. The world and our lives in it are often too busy and preoccupied to give the Holy Spirit the chance to get through to us. This hour of a Sunday is tremendously important - more so than most people realize - for we deliberately set the time aside to wait upon the Lord, as an old-fashioned term puts it. It is one of the few opportunities we have to be still; to be apart from the hurly burly and hustle and bustle of life; to be open to God; to reach out to him.

The personal presence of Jesus meant a great deal to the disciples, once they had begun to trust him. Remember how scared they were when the storm blew up on the Sea of Galilee, and how relieved and reassured they were when Jesus came to them. Remember how frustrated they were trying to heal the epileptic boy while Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration, and how relieved when he returned and took charge. When Jesus promised that the Father would send another Advocate who would be

with his disciples for ever, he implied by the word "another" that he meant another similar to himself. Thus the Holy Spirit is no less than God's personal presence with his disciples throughout all ages.

The teaching ministry of Jesus meant a great deal to the disciples. He taught them so much about life, character, relationships with others, and about his own mission. But they failed again and again to understand and to accept that teaching. Peter for instance totally misunderstood that Jesus would have to die before he could overcome the power of evil by resurrection, and he was severely rebuked at times: "Get thee behind me, Satan". Even afterwards he was slow to learn that the salvation won by Christ was for all mankind, not merely the Jews, until the Holy Spirit led him to the truth. Then he was able to say to Cornelius, the Roman centurion: "You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without objection." (Acts 10:28,29)

The authoritative guidance of Jesus meant a great deal to the disciples. How often do we read of Jesus guiding and directing His followers in the right way to act and believe. 'You have heard it said by men of old But I say ...' A few Sundays ago we were reminded of the incident on the road to Emmaus, when the Risen Jesus walked with two of the disciples and 'interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.' He had told them how to serve, to teach, what to say and what to do. No doubt they felt very lost, lonely and bewildered in those fifty days between Easter and Pentecost; knowing the task, fearing its magnitude and dangers, no knowing where or how to begin. There is a daily struggle in the life of every believer striving to follow Christ. However we do not need to be bewildered about the way we should act. The promise Jesus made to the disciples then is a promise to every generation. It is up to us to lay hold of that promise.

But there is one condition: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." 'They who have My commandments and keep them, are those who love Me; and those who love Me will be loved by My Father and I will love them and reveal Myself to them.' (John 14:15 & 21)

The casual, indifferent so-called Christian who places himself and his own concerns at the centre of his being, does not allow the Holy Spirit to operate in him or through him. Too many of us are in that category, not fully committing our loves to God As I said earlier, the Holy Spirit is no gate-crasher. It is all too easy to put our jobs, our sport, our hobbies, and other concerns ahead of God's requirements. And Jesus did say, 'No one can serve two masters: for either they will hate the one and love the other, or else will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God *and* Mammon.

If Christians continue to put Almighty God second to the interests and pursuits of the world, they then lose all the power, the guidance and support that the Holy Spirit has to offer. With so many people today turned or turning away from obedience to God is it any wonder that society is in the mess it is? Broken homes, spoiled lives, homeless youngsters, drug addiction, sexually transmitted disease, bashings, robberies, and prostitution.

The promise of Jesus is not 'pie in the sky.' It is not an opiate for the masses. It is not heaven someday and somehow all will be put right. It is the truth here and now, in this life on earth, we can enjoy the strength and comfort and guidance of Christ's presence, - not in the old physical sense experienced by the original disciples, but through the Holy Spirit.

So obedience to the known commands of Christ is at one and the same time proof of the genuineness of our love for Him, and the proof of the sincerity of our request for the Holy Spirit – the Advocate, the Counsellor, the Comforter, the Helper, the Guide, the Strengthener, to come into our lives. Otherwise we are fooling ourselves and merely playing at being a Christian.

The Holy Spirit's power is truly a gift from God, coming in Christ's Name to help Christian men and women to walk in the light of Christ. We cannot afford to waste this precious gift, and so risk losing it, but we must seek to be filled continuously with that power, promised to all who would love and serve the Lord. **Amen**