



Making Christ Present

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Acts 16.9-15; Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5; John 14.23-29

The Confirmation classes at St Martin's are about half way through. We're using the Pilgrim course from the Church of England to guide us. At the beginning and end of each session there are prayers, with time to reflect on a passage in a lectio divina style, allowing the passage to speak to us, as we share our thoughts, wonderings and reflections together. There is a sense of God dwelling with us. We are exploring the big questions of the Christian faith and as we do so, allowing those taking part to bring their questions as well as their wisdom and life experience to share and work with. It requires open hearts and minds, towards one another and to God.

In the last session someone bravely said that they struggled with whether Jesus was really God. How could God really be with us as a human being? We held that question as we reflected on our experiences of Holy Week and Easter – moments of doubt, fear and sorrow – moments of surprising joy and revelation – having feet washed, sitting quietly in the dark of the vigil, knowing loss at the foot of the cross, cycling away from St Martin's at the end of Easter Day, full of hope and life and exuberance.

One person said that the questions and doubts had still been there as they experienced Easter but somehow they didn't seem so pressing. Intellectually Christ as God's real presence seemed so improbable to them but in reality they found themselves caught up in his life: deep experience meeting and overcoming uncertainty and doubt.

As the group shared these moments what we were doing was describing to each other what it meant to share the presence of Christ, travelling together as his community through the momentous journey of his passion, death and resurrection. Everyone had found a way of owning and experiencing that presence for themselves. Perhaps you will have your own experience of that presence yourself and will have moments that spoke to you deeply too.

The disciples at the Last Supper are grappling to understand what Jesus is telling them as he prepares them for a time when he will no longer be there. They have lived and breathed life with him, but what will it mean to know Jesus when he is taken from them? How can he be present with them? How will others believe when they haven't had a personal relationship with him?

Jesus prepares them with these words, so that when it happens they know to seek for his authentic presence, in the midst of confusion and doubt. They will need open hearts and Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit to guide and help them. They are struggling to understand but like our confirmation group and like us, they will have to live it to believe it.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is responding to a question from Judas (the other Judas, not Judas Iscariot) who asks him 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world.'

Jesus replies that it is in loving him and keeping his commandments, that they will reveal his presence. That's how Jesus will reveal himself, through a community of love, in action and prayer. The disciples will be involved in making Jesus present. It's not about Jesus doing things that will

impress the world but in the faithful living out of his love by those who follow him. He is entrusting his life to them. They will make his presence known by making space for God to dwell with them.

'Love' will be his presence, love shown by their faithfulness, as guided by the Holy Spirit they live out all that Jesus has taught and shown them, in his faithful witness to the Father.

When the disciples keep his word by living in his love, they will know and experience the love of God and that love will dwell with them. They will continue to love not by holding on to precious memories of the past but by keeping his commandments and doing his work in the present: living into his passion for truth and justice, his care for the poor and oppressed, his willingness to challenge and make present the transforming presence of God in the world. This is how God's love and Jesus' abiding presence is revealed. It requires them to have open hearts to allow his presence to dwell with them so that they can show God's heart to the world.

It means that we too are commissioned to make his love present, are entrusted with his life, in our faithful keeping of his word, making space for God to dwell with us.

Last week we launched "At the Heart. On the Edge." It is our new Action Plan for St Martin's. It is full of ways in which we believe we are being called to make Christ present and live in his love. And this Sunday, the Sunday before Ascension Day is a good day for us to be affirming that we wish to be the place where Christ will dwell so that his presence may be made known through our faithfulness to that calling and those plans; in attentive love for neighbour, in justice and welcome for the excluded, in worship and community, in generous living, and careful stewardship, in the joy of music and companionship, and prayer and word that makes present the transforming life of Christ, and sharing that as widely as we are able. 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them.'

I wonder how you are planning to keep Christ's word and love him, and allow him to make his home with you. How do you 'Keep Christ's word....' in your daily life, in your relationships, in your decision making, in what you pay attention to, in how you treat others.

It's a wonderful invitation, into a life and way of living. It requires our trust, our open heart, our willingness to go at his pace not our own, to commit to others rather than go it alone because we think we know best, to the discovery of a better way together. Keeping Christ's word means allowing Christ-like love and compassion and gentleness and generosity to lead us. It's a way to live all of our life. It means being willing to take risks and be steadfast for the truth, trusting that God will be present with us through his Spirit.

As we heard the Hillsborough verdict this week and the truth of that terrible day and the aftermath and years of struggle for the families as they sought vindication for their loved ones, there was so much evidence of keeping faith: faith for a son, a daughter, father, brother, friend; Faith that their story would be told, keeping faithful to the truth of that day, no matter how much it hurt, no matter who it challenged.

James Jones the former Bishop of Liverpool, who chaired the Hillsborough Independent panel, and who will be with us this coming Thursday preaching at our Ascension Day service, said that he believed justice would follow truth, that truth had its own weight. Isn't this quest for truth about making Jesus present?

Making Jesus present is just what Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy are doing on their missionary journey to Macedonia, (modern day Greece), having been inspired by a vision to go there. In the Roman colony of Philippi, they go outside the city to a place of prayer where they meet

Lydia and some other women. She is a woman of means, from Thyatira, trading in purple cloth, someone of social position, independent, running her own household, a gentile and a god-fearer.

Lydia's heart has already been prepared and she responds to Paul's preaching and she and her whole household are baptised. This is the making present, the indwelling that Jesus has promised. Sharing God's life they discover God already at work. Lydia's open-hearted response is to invite them to her home. She too is already trusting, wanting to be 'faithful to the Lord'. It is the beginning of the church in Philippi and in Europe. This is how Jesus is revealed, through open hearts and the sharing of his generous love that steps out in faith, not knowing fully what lies ahead. We don't know what doubts and questions Lydia had but what we see is loving obedience and generous hospitality, in the spirit of Jesus, whom she has never met.

And what are we being faithful and open hearted for? For the coming of God's kingdom. The vision we have in Revelation is of the new holy city of Jerusalem where we are truly welcomed home to dwell with God forever. Jesus has shown us how to find our way there, through his life, his death on the cross, and resurrection. He is the way God flings open his heart to us forever.

In that city there will be no barriers to knowing God and being with God. It's a place where the gates will always be open and all are welcomed. A place of light and fruitfulness. Where life will flow and all will be healed and forgiven. The healing of nations, of wrongs and injustices, inequality and prejudice, pain and lies and fear.

An open faithful heart is all that he asks of us. So that he may dwell with us and lead us there and lead those whose lives we touch with the presence of Christ.