**John 14:15-21**

**The Holy Spirit and us**

We are moving on in our ‘What Christians Believe’ series of sermons to think today about who the Holy Spirit is and what difference the Holy Spirit makes in our lives.

 As Christians, we worship one God who reveals himself in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And, of all these three Persons, the Holy Spirit might be the hardest for us to get our heads around. We can have a picture in our head of God the Father, because we have earthly fathers as a sort of model of how a heavenly Father might be or might not be…We can have a picture in our head of God the Son, because Jesus was fully human, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have all the wonderful stories about Jesus that we know from the Gospels in the Bible. But God the Holy Spirit…we don’t really have an image of this that we can draw on in our imaginations. God the Holy Spirit seems to be too abstract, too conceptual for us to imagine and if that is the case, how are we to interact with God as Holy Spirit?

 But whilst that may be the case, Jesus did speak of the Holy Spirit in very concrete terms, actually, in terms of what the Holy Spirit will do in our lives. And the Bible writers as well do talk of the Holy Spirit in concrete terms.

 So, who is the Holy Spirit – and why is he important to us?

 The reading we heard from John’s Gospel comes from the Last Supper at which Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He has been telling his disciples that the time has come for him to leave them but he is saying that they don’t need to be despondent about that because God will still be with them – just in a different form: through the Holy Spirit.

 And that is true for us today, of course. Jesus is no longer here, he has returned to heaven at the Ascension. Jesus is gone – he doesn’t live on our hearts. He is in heaven where he is constantly praying for us.

 But the absence of Jesus in our lives does not mean the absence of God in our lives because God is still with us, through his Holy Spirit. We proclaim that truth as we start our Communion Prayer: I say, “The Lord is here” and you reply, “His Spirit is with us”.

 God is here today, he is ever-present in our lives, through his Holy Spirit

 As Jesus embodied God during his time on earth, bringing comfort and help and guidance and healing to the people he met, so God is embodied to us today through his Holy Spirit, bringing us comfort and help and guidance and healing. So we can be confident in God’s presence with us, always…

 And we do need to be absolutely sure that the Holy Spirit is ‘God with us’. The Holy Spirit is not the spirit of life within each one of us. The Holy Spirit is not the human spirit striving to be the best it can be. The Holy Spirit is not the divine spark within us that empowers our soul. The Holy Spirit is the embodiment of God – dwelling within each one of us who have become united with Christ through our salvation.

 The Holy Spirit, then, is not an ‘It’. Traditionally, we use the word ‘He’ for the Holy Spirit - but ‘She’ would be equally OK because in the Greek, the word used is actually neuter, neither male nor female. So either He or She is equally right and equally wrong because the Holy Spirit is the Person of God – not an It – but beyond gender.

 And we need to think through the quite radical nature of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is not just ‘with us’ – he is ‘in us’: the Holy Spirit actually, physically dwells within us. As Jesus says here in verse 17: “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” The Holy Spirit is God physically within us and if God dwells within us, then we will notice a change in our lives.

 The first of these is that, as time goes by, we grow in the Fruit of the Spirit.

 You might remember these from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, 5:22-23, where he says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. These are the characteristics that the Holy Spirit places within us and increasingly should become the governing principles through which we live our lives the more we come to rely on the Holy Spirit in our lives.

 That’s not to say that our lives always reflect these characteristics: if we are honest, we recognize that sometimes we aren’t as kind as we should be, we are not always loving towards others, we may not be as gentle as we could be…all of us fall short of these ideals in our lives on occasions. But generally speaking, as we see the map of our lives unfold, so these character traits become more representative of who we are and how we interact with other people.

 The fruit of the Spirit grows within our lives and eventually blossoms within us.

 The second of these is that, as time goes by, we learn to exercise our Spiritual Gifts.

 These are gifts that the Holy Spirit gives us, which is different from our natural talents; gifts given to us to help us grow his church. In the Bible, there are 27 Gifts of the Spirit listed and all of us who are Christians have one or more of these gifts. And, as we discover what these Gifts are, so our ministry in the church strengthens and so the church grows.

 Over the next few weeks, we are running a series of sessions on ‘Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts’. It’s not too late to sign up for these – so please let me know if you want to attend…

 So the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit are the two primary ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work within us to transform us into the people God has created us to be and to strengthen us for ministry in the church.

 The Holy Spirit is God-present-with-us, in the here and now, transforming us and growing us so that we can be a blessing to others and to the world. Someone once described the Holy Spirit as ‘the Present Tense of God’: not the God of history, not the God of the future, but the God of the here and now, active in the world and active in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us experience God on a day-to-day basis, the one who gives us faith, the one who sustains us, the one who keeps us in the presence of God every moment of every day.

 The Holy Spirit is ‘God-present-with-us’ in our baptism. The Holy Spirit is ‘God-present-with-us’ as we share Holy Communion together today. The Holy Spirit is ‘God-present-with-us’ as the Word of God is spoken to us through the sermon and through the Bible Readings.

 The Holy Spirit is God-with-us as a Christian community, empowering us and growing us in the faith. As the Holy Spirit increasingly dictates our life, so we will increasingly become obedient to God’s will for our lives.

 And that is how we end this passage from John’s Gospel. Jesus says this: “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…”

 Now, this is an interesting question: “Do you love Jesus?”

 “Do you love Jesus?”

 For many of us, myself included, it is not an obvious question to answer. I know what it feels like to love my parents. I know what it feels like to love my wife and family. I know what it feels like to love my friends. I can describe those feelings to you. But, to be honest, I don’t know what it feels like to love Jesus. When I think of Jesus, I don’t get warm, fuzzy feelings towards him. The thought of Jesus does not give me butterflies in my tummy.

 The truth is that, for me at least, loving Jesus is not described or experienced as a sentiment or emotion. It is a different kind of love than that which I have for other people.

 It may be the same for you too: if I asked you “Do you love Jesus?” you may doubt your love for him because you can’t describe it in terms of emotions or sentiments. But fortunately, that is not the kind of love that Jesus wants for us! When it comes to love, Jesus doesn’t want warm sentiments, he wants obedience. When it comes to love, Jesus doesn’t want our feelings so much as our actions. When it comes to love, Jesus doesn’t want emotion, he wants devotion…

 Notice what Jesus says here: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments…” Love for Jesus is not about our emotions. Love for Jesus is about following his call on our lives, and living in obedience to him. Authentic love for Jesus is shown by how we live to him and how we live with each other.

 So if you don’t ‘feel anything’ for Jesus, it doesn’t mean that you don’t love him. If you are trying to be obedient to his will for your life, then that is the only expression of love that Jesus wants from you. Love for Jesus may begin with emotion but as it deepens, it moves through to obedience and devotion. And that is how it should be.

 But how do we obey Jesus, how do we live a life of devotion to him? Surely not on our own strength! Because none of us are capable of doing that ourselves because all of us are spiritually weak…

 Instead, we must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us; changing us, transforming us, drawing us closer to God. The more we let go of our own lives and allow God to work in us, the more devoted to Jesus we will become. The more we stop trying to control our own lives and hand over that control to the Holy Spirit within us, the more obedient to Jesus we will become.

 Ultimately, then, the experience of the Holy Spirit within us is the absolute foundation of our experience as Christians. The Holy Spirit leads us into a relationship with God. The Holy Spirit gives us spiritual gifts to use in the ministry of God. The Holy Spirit grows good fruit in us to help us become the people we are destined to be. The Holy Spirit leads us into obedience, which is how we express devotion to Jesus.

 The Holy Spirit in our lives is the only way we can live out our calling as Christians and the more we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, the more we will know what it is to have life in all its fullness within the love of God. And that is why Jesus had this to say to his disciples, even though they didn’t understand him: he said in John 16: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Spirit will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you”.

 Jesus is no longer here – he has gone and left us: Praise God for that!! Because if Jesus were still with us, we would not know the power of the Spirit in our lives and we would not know what it is to live the Christian life.

 The Lord is here. His Spirit is with us.

 That is good news for us all and that is the foundation for our experience of God in the ‘here and now’. As we take Holy Communion in a few moments time, it is that truth we celebrate…