

WBC 1 May 2005 - A sermon by Geoff Wraight.

John 14:15-21

The Mystery of Love and the Power of the Spirit

- What makes us more than just a group of people who gather together every week to sing and pray and talk a lot about God?
- What makes us more than just a bunch of people who have a common interest in helping out others who are not so fortunate as the rest and who are in need of help?
- What makes us more than just a group of individuals who profess some kind of spiritual experience of God and come together to share this with each other?
- What makes us more than a group of friends who follow an historical but very significant prophet and radical teacher called Jesus and try to live in a way that honours his life and teachings?
- Is there more to it than this?
- And can we put our finger on the factor that transforms an ordinary group of people like us into a living, growing expression of the mystery of God?

These questions could well have been the questions in the mind of the writer of John's Gospel when he came to put down in words what can only be described as an invitation. An invitation to experience and know the mystery of God's love as it is expressed in the story of Jesus and the ongoing presence of the risen Christ.

John 14 is part of a section of John's Gospel often called the "Farewell Discourse". It is written in the context of Jesus leaving his friends with assurance and comfort even though it seems like death is the end. It is full of assurances that even though he will physically be gone he will still be present in a very real way that will fill them with hope and energy to continue the mission he came to fulfill.

Everything in this part of John's Gospel points to a continuation of the work and mission of Jesus in the life and work of the community of Jesus.

So Jesus speaks to reassure the disciples and us with the promise of the "Paraclete", from the Greek word *paracletos*, variously translated as companion, advocate, counsellor, encourager— one who comes alongside, or "backer" as Nathan Nettleton's paraphrase has it. This is a wonderful image of the role of the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit as we have come to call it - at work in our lives and in the world.

But the key point here in John's reference is found in how the writer speaks of the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. "I will ask the Father and he will give you **another Advocate to be with you forever**" or as Nathan puts it, "I will have a word with the Father and arrange for another backer to be permanently assigned to you."

The idea is that Jesus understands himself to have played that role with the disciples to this point... In his absence, they will not be left with our encouragement. They will still have the benefit of his presence and help.

Things get even more mysterious..

He goes on to address the fears of his friends by telling them that even though he is gone he is still here, even though we can see him we will see him. “I’m not going to leave you to fend for yourselves like abandoned children; I’ll be there for you. Soon the rest of the world will think I’m gone — out of sight, out of mind — but you’ll still be seeing me. I am really living, and because of that you’ll be really living too. When that day comes you’ll be left in no doubt that I am one with my Father, and that you are one with me and I am one with you.”

Being seen and yet not seen can’t be explained in simplistic ways. How will we see Jesus when the world does not? The next sentence gives a clue, “Those who take seriously what I’ve said and live it out are the ones who truly love me. My Father will love all those who truly love me, I’ll love them too and bare my soul to them.”

So while our unity in God through Christ is mystical, it is borne out in actions demonstrating love and faithfulness.

All this talk about being an extension of Jesus through the Spirit of Truth who in turn is an extension of the Father is enough to drive you to a doctrine of the Trinity and it probably did..

But doctrines and mysterious theology is probably not the intention of the original writer of these words of Jesus.

John deals with these basic truths of Christian faith and relates them not in terms of what we should believe or ascribe to, not in terms of what we have to do to be saved or how we are to prepare for some future salvation.

Instead he talks about living out the mystery and truth of Christ’s presence and love in the here and now.

He can do this because, as one commentator puts it:

“ the chief focus of his spirituality is not a place or a time, but a person and a set of relationships. The focus is not quantity, but quality. The focus is not bigger miracles or stricter commandments, but the expansion of the initiative of love which comes from God and seeks to fill the world.

This is why for all John’s talk about the Spirit, the focus is not ecstasy or miracle, as one might expect in Luke and Acts, but presence. The focus is not mystical experiences. If mysticism applies at all to John, it is focused on relationship and resultant action, on communities of love which ‘speak for themselves’ (13:34-35).

The passage is framed by human anxiety about the absence of Jesus and ultimately about the absence of God (14:1; 14:27). It does not deny the anxiety and distress, but offers a promise of presence and sense of meaning embedded in sharing God’s life and participating in God’s action in the world, recognizable by its ‘Jesus-shape’.”

Finally, it is very important to note that in this passage, all of Jesus’ promises are spoken in the second person plural.

That is, the “you” when he says, if you love me and I will not leave you and you will see me and you will know the unity of God in Christ is not addressing an individual but the community as a whole.

Which brings us back to the original questions.

What makes this group of people different?

The answer according to John is both mysterious and yet incredible simple..

When we live out the love of Jesus to one another and to the world we will know and experience the mystery of being an extension of the love of God alive and present in the world and in us.

And visa versa – as we acknowledge and trust the mystery of God’s presence in us as we live and act in community, we will be enabled to live out the love of God with energy and vitality that defies human explanation.

This is the faith we are called to and celebrate as we gather around this table today.