

THE EMMAUS SERIES

6th Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17

1 Peter 3:15-18

John 14:15-21

If you love me you will keep my commandments

In the Risen Lord, his disciples were confronted by God's final achievement in a transformed creation. The overwhelming and mysterious nature of this experience - an encounter that involved every level of their being - is reflected in the various passages of the gospels that attempt to communicate it. On the surface, the symbolic imagery and circumstantial detail they use are difficult to reconcile. Beneath the surface, however, they have a remarkable unity: against all expectations they know the Jesus who has been so long in their company, triumphant in his humanity over death; he greets them generously, and initiates a new relationship with them that they find challenging; he entrusts them with a mission to the whole world, announcing the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Today, our Easter liturgy aims to awaken in us the recognition that we too are called to share in this mission - through the gift of Christ's own Spirit. In our gospel reading from John, 'Advocate' translates the word, 'paraclete', used several times in this gospel. This term indicates far more than one who will speak for us when we are on trial. It signifies someone who will stand by us whatever our need - our 'champion' we could say. The work of the Spirit is clearly expressed in the words of Jesus: 'I will not leave you orphans, he says, 'I will come back to you'. He will be present, however, in a new way, as his own Spirit leads the faith-filled community in a fuller understanding of all that he said and did.

This union with the Saviour, through his Spirit, is to be far more than a comforting spiritual union. 'If you love me you will keep my commandments', he says. What are these commandments? Immediately before the passage selected for our liturgy, Jesus has spoken of the 'works' that will be a sign of true belief in him. In the tradition that gave us John's gospel, we know, all is summed up in a single commandment, 'Love one another, as I have loved you'. The Spirit will lead us into the fullness of truth and life brought by the Risen Lord, as we give ourselves to practical love and service.

In our reading from Acts we see the first Christian community taking up the mission they have received. Philip, one of its seven 'deacons' - remembering, no doubt, the example of Jesus - takes the Good News of reconciliation to the Samaritans, the hated enemies of old Israel. It was through the leadership of the apostles, this incident shows, that the Spirit built up the Church's communion of love and service.

If our union with the Risen Lord must find a practical expression, it is certainly, Peter tells us in his letter, a most personal bond: 'Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts' he tells us, and then your lives will bring true blessings to those around you.

John Thornhill sm