

23 May 2010

Pentecost

Sermon notes: John 14.8-17,
25-27

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There are two things in this morning's gospel reading upon which I want to expand a little, before coming to say something about what it *means* to speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The first has to do with Philip's request of Jesus, 'Show us the Father', and the second to do with Jesus' extraordinary suggestion that his disciples will do greater things than he himself did.

"Show us the Father, and then we will be satisfied!" Philip's request of Jesus pretty much sums up how most of us have felt at one time or another, whether we are believers or not – show me God, and I'll be convinced! I suspect that the response of most of *us* (if we were Jesus) would be – "Ah, I can't show you God, because God has chosen not to show himself, that we might be required to make a choice on faith", or something similar. Jesus says no such thing, but rather this: *Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father", Jesus declares.*

This kind of thing is pretty familiar to Christians, but I wonder sometimes if perhaps it is so familiar that we miss its significance. What Jesus says here is about the most offensive thing about the Christian understanding of God. For what might seem to be the biggest "thing" in the world is narrowed down to the smallest of things – a single human being: "to have seen *me* is to have seen the Father." If we miss the significance of this then we are going to miss the point of the gospel altogether, for it is to be found just here.

But first just to stay a little longer with what Jesus says here about his relation to the Father. The important point is that Jesus is *not* now a new piece of information about God. It is not as if we all have an understanding of who God is or isn't, and now we add Jesus to that understanding, as if Jesus just gives us some more details. Jesus is so closely bound up with who this God is that he is actually giving us a "new" God – that is, a totally transformed understanding of what God is. Philip says, "Show us the Father" because he, with the rest of the disciples, has missed that the Father is seen in Jesus – and can only be seen in Jesus. Philip

thinks that he has an image of God in his head which Jesus can fill out for him with some special act of revelation. But Jesus answers: what you see is what there is!

John insists throughout his gospel that no one has seen God, which is to say that our ideas, our visions or images of God, miss the mark. Only the one who *has* seen God (that is, Jesus the Son) is able to make him known. John's gospel preaches that the thing we all have in common – and so the most important thing to any of us – is located here in Jesus of Nazareth. Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus.

But note that it's not as if Jesus is somehow "like" God, in the sense that (for example) Jesus says the kind of things which God would say "if he were here". Jesus effectively says, look into my eyes, and see God. *Here* is God, and not some place else.

But the question is, *Is* Jesus "godly" enough? We have to ask that question, to the extent that we can, *without* referring to what we might already believe about Jesus. And we have to see that it is not a "moral" question. That is, what would it *mean* for *Jesus* to be the presence of the God of all the universe? It is not enough to "believe" this, or to assert it. It is the difference it makes which makes "believing" worthwhile.

We'll come back to this in a while. But before that, we'll look at the other aspect I want to draw out a bit today:

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

The one who believes in Jesus "will do greater works" than those done by Jesus himself. I'm not sure if that's the kind of thing which ought to excite us or terrify us! Certainly it's hard to make sense of, for we're not really convinced that we are performing the same kinds of signs which Jesus himself performed.

But there's another way of reading this which might seem in one way to soften our expectations of what we should be able to do, and yet in another make a further scandalous claim about God (the first scandalous claim being that to see Jesus *is* to see the Father). The works Jesus did, while reported to us as miraculous wonders, were never *merely* such wonders. In John's gospel especially, these miracles are called "signs", pointers to who Jesus is and who sent him. Consider, for example the miracle of the water into wine (John 2). As a trick, it is very impressive. But none of the miracles Jesus' performs are ever "tricks". They are always what John calls "signs". Without this sign-

pointing, the evangelists have no interest in the miracles.

When it comes to understanding the miracles, the question is, *What are they pointing to?* The “greater works” which the followers of Jesus are to perform are similarly not merely miracles, but signs which point to Jesus as the one sent by the Father, Jesus as the one who makes the Father known. We heard from last week’s reading that the sign which makes the Father’s sending of the Son known is the unity of the disciples. The greater work which the disciples will do, through the unity which is to develop among them through the gift of the Spirit, is to become a continuing and expanding sign of the Father’s sending of the Son. Or, to point it differently, the “greater” work of the disciples of Jesus is to extend the understanding that when one sees Jesus, one sees the Father.

But why all the theological gobbledygook? What has the seeing of the Father in the Son to do with anything? It is about revealing, and re-valuing, the world. For the unity of Jesus and the Father is not a “spiritual” union or a heavenly thing, if by “heaven” we imagine somewhere other than *here*. It is Jesus *as a human being* – sharing our very real and tangible humanity – who is “one” with the Father.

The full force of this is felt when we allow that even at the point of the crucifixion this unity stands. That is, even when the full extent of human *distance* from God is experienced, it remains that case that “the Word became flesh” – that this broken, discarded flesh, still speaks “God”. Seeing Jesus – even the crucified Jesus – is to see God. There is here, then, a very strong affirmation of the world even in its apparent God-forsakenness. God’s love for the world is for the world in the full spectrum of its being, from its virtuous heights to its heinous depths.

And what has the Holy Spirit to do with all this? Jesus tells us that the Spirit will “teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. And what does Jesus say? Not, in John’s gospel, a lot of do’s and don’ts but “Who has seen me has seen the Father”; “The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father”; “The Father and I are one”.

The Spirit, then, in reminding us of “all that Jesus said”, establishes for us that Jesus is, indeed, the “location” of God. Pushing it further, the work of the Spirit is to reveal that the world is, properly understood, the place where God is to be found. The gospel of John *begins* with the affirmation that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – *among us, as “flesh”*. The thinking of the community of John *ends* with the affirmation we heard a couple of weeks ago:

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them... (Revelation 21.3)

And we stand in the middle of these two events. Or, rather, we stand as the sign that these two events – what has happened and what will happen – are the same thing, and the “greater thing” Jesus says it is our work to do is, in Christ’s own Spirit, to testify in word and deed to this or, to borrow from last week’s gospel reading, to become the sign of the unity of the Father and the Son, the unity of “God” and “the world”.

For the gospel is that “God so loves the world” that he makes it his home, with which comes the other affirmation of the Revelation to John:

he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21.4).

It is with this end in mind that the church prays, taking our lead from the psalmist, Send forth your spirit and renew the face of the earth. Send forth your Spirit, and make us whole.

By the grace of God, Amen.