

**NAURC 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
John 14: 15-21

> Today I wish to reflect on the Gospel reading set for this sixth Sunday of the Easter season which comes from John – so I am going to start at the end of Matthew!

> Yes, I know it's a rather scatty thing to do and I'm *not* setting out to cause confusion, but the two passages have a similar message.

> Here are the words of Jesus recorded in the last line of Matthew's Gospel: "And I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

> Words of reassurance to sustain the disciples into an unknown future.

> The passage in John 14 is a record of what Jesus said to the disciples at the Last Supper which has a similar feel of reassurance to it:  
"When I go, you will not be left all alone; I will come back to you. (v18)

> Sadly, we have got rather too used to being left alone over the last couple of months. Without being able to physically gather to worship together and chat with friends it has felt like a bit of an exiled existence. But at least we are still here to tell the tale – so staying safe has, in the most part, worked.

> I for one, have missed the sense of God's presence that comes from worshipping with you all. These past weeks have been very different, and I have had to rely on perceiving God's presence in other ways that work for me, especially through the endless wonder of creation.

> But it can be difficult to hold onto the idea that *all the time*, God, through Jesus, is with us when we are and where we are.

> Rt Rev Colin Sinclair, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has written some notes about the service for today and I think he has some interesting points to make, about discerning God's presence with us - and I quote:

"God is no attention-seeking showman. Sometimes we have to look hard for God and sometimes we have to trust that God is there when we are tempted to think otherwise. Nor is the promise that "God is with us" an insurance policy against pain, or a talisman against misfortune. Rather God is with us in our pain and present even when life goes against us. Our understanding of God is framed by the revelation of God to us in Jesus Christ. His suffering and death help us to believe that God understands what we face. His resurrection is the anchor on which we depend, believing that suffering, evil and even death, do not have the last word. Everything now has to be evaluated in the light of the Easter events. Our view of Jesus, our understanding of God, our need of forgiveness and our future hope, revolve around that weekend that shook the world.

> Personally, I'd prefer to say that Easter reshaped and renewed the world – and we are the latest in a long line of 'Easter people' living lives renewed by our Saviour, Jesus.

> Most, probably all of us know deep in our hearts that this is both true and will remain true forever – even so do we still have concerns about what the future holds in store for us?

> Admittedly the disciples were in an utterly different context to us, but they too were faced with the question: “what happens next?”

> In John’s Gospel, Jesus was still alive when he gave his reassurance – but all of them at the Last Supper knew that, very soon, nothing would ever be the same again.

> At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the resurrected Jesus gives the disciples the reassurance they needed as they were commissioned to carry the ministry of Jesus onwards into the future.

> On both occasions the disciples didn’t know what lay ahead of them, other than that things would never be the same again, but Jesus had promised they would get help.

> That help would come in the person of the Holy Spirit.

> We too, are in a position of knowing that the future is unlikely to ever be quite the same again as the first tentative steps of easing lockdown take place.

> We too live the new life given by Jesus – but we too may feel nervous, uncertain about what is to come and our role within a new dynamic that has yet to worked out.

> We too may feel like we are in need of help to enable us to navigate our way forward in life right now – we too may feel like we need to ask Jesus for that help He promised to get us through what is to come.

> One of my favourite hymns “O God of burning cleansing flame, send the fire” has a line in it “we need another Pentecost”. I so disagree with the theology of that line, that whenever I sing it, I change the words.

> We don’t need another Pentecost, for the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples, and has never left. We rely on the gift of her presence every moment of every day of our lives as Christians.

> Unlike the disciples who had to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit – until the day of Pentecost in Luke’s account, but only ‘till the evening of Easter Day’ in John’s (see 20:22), we have the helper we need, but we remain in a time of waiting to see what the future holds.

> For a while, our attention has been rightly on getting by and making the most of the changed circumstances of staying healthy and keeping others well too during lockdown. But this past week the media and the URC have turned their attention to exploring the question; ‘What comes next?’

> Regarding the church buildings and worship there are many practical matters to consider – so the elders will have their work cut out! But to conclude these reflections I’d like to encourage us to think through how we as church wherever we are, and as individuals can help to mould the future shape of our restarted version of society.

> Certainly, many people are saying 'nothing will be the same again'. What hasn't been addressed adequately in my view, is what will this 'new' be like?

> I feel that the tragedy of this pandemic and the appalling loss of life may yet give us the opportunity to find a positive outcome for the future. But this will involve all of us in practical ways and through a whole lot of prayer.

> To illustrate what I mean, I'd like to tell you about two things that happened in the space of a few minutes recently:

> I went to drop off some documents to a church member on the bank holiday to mark VE Day. I was en route to having to go shopping, so was in the car and turned into the close where the person lived. I didn't get any further and had to leave the car as there was a politely socially distanced street party going on. As I wove my way carefully past people one woman suddenly exclaimed; 'don't get too near I might catch something!' I hope she was joking, but as I didn't know her, I couldn't tell.

Maybe it was a serious concern? And soon we may have the opportunity to use an 'app' on our mobile phones that can warn us to avoid certain 'infectious' people.

> Is this the sort of future we want? Is it progress to treat others as a threat unless we know otherwise? Keeping our distance may be necessary at times, but keeping a physical distance may become a habit that grows roots that bear the fruit of suspicion and distrust. Do we want that?

> In contrast, there was a family sitting in the middle of the road having a picnic – they were happy, having fun, smiling and were happy to exchange a cheery greeting as did many other people. Best of all was the terrific sense of coming together and of community, of sharing and belonging.

> Which direction to choose? Pulling away or pulling together?

> Jesus promised that those who follow Him would be given, deep within them, the presence of a helper, an advocate who would help them to know what to do and what to say.

> And that presence would be of Jesus and of God. This presence within you and within me through the medium of our faith brings us all together into a community of the resurrection life of Jesus.

> I hope, I pray, that whenever and wherever opportunities unfold in times to come the advocate will enable us to bring about a new, better future. One where we may have to continue be a bit cautious until a vaccine becomes available, but one that thrives on that sense of belonging to each other, of sharing and caring and, yes, love – the sort of love that Jesus taught us; love that wants the very best for another, regardless.

> Jesus was the one who touched the lepers of His day, who asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, who shared meals with tax collectors – He valued life in all its forms regardless of human labels.

> I hope we can do all we can to begin again with hope and love as our guiding principles. Let's seek to overcome fear and distrust with a mutual sense of our common humanity – which we know is founded in God.

> Just like the disciples, we don't know what the future holds in store. And as Revd Sinclair reminds us it probably won't be all plain-sailing. But I feel that we do have a precious opportunity here to revisit the principles that guided the URC many years ago: justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

All of this enfolded in the love of Jesus, God's Son, and worked out through each one of us by the promised Holy Spirit.

Amen