**17th May 2020**

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Call to worship

The Father loves you.
The Son loves you.
The Spirit loves you.
Come and show your love.



**HYMN: Come down O Love Divine**

**1 Come down, O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.**

**2 O let it freely burn,
Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.**

**3 And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace,
Till Love create a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.**



A prayer of approach

Gracious God, we come before you,
drawn by the power of your welcoming love.
We come with our sorrows and joys.
We come with our expectations and apprehensions.
We come with what we have done.
We come as who we are.
In your love we find peace and hope.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

God of love, we are sorry
that at times our love for you falters;
that we have wrong priorities;
that we overlook your guidance.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

Loving Saviour, we are sorry
that we disobey your commandments;
that we fail to love;
that we walk by on the other side.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

Spirit of truth, we are sorry
that we disregard your presence;
that our thoughts and feelings are unrighteous;
that we follow the world’s way.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

May your presence abiding in us lead us in the right way,
in the name of Jesus.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

You make yourself known to us, and you are present in our lives
even though we do not always recognise or acknowledge you.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

You do not leave us orphaned,
but embrace us with parental love that encourages and comforts us.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

You ensure that we are not alone
by filling us with your Spirit of truth, that inspires and empowers us.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

Thank you, Father, for your presence,
your love and your encouragement.
Amen.



**Focus Scripture: John 14:15–21**

The advice from the government changed this week and the strapline

Stay Home, protect the NHS, Save lives

changed to

Stay alert, control the virus, save lives

It has prompted many to think up their own strap lines as alternatives:

Stay alert, eat your greens, make your bed!

Inject bleach, don’t inject bleach, Yeah right!

Drink more, clap your hands louder, drink more

Rich people are losing money, you are disposable, get back out there and work

Develop the ability to see microscopic viruses, OK now develop a vaccine for the virus, the last bit is the same: save lives

Whilst stay home was quite clear, stay alert is very ambiguous to say the least. Judging by the increase of traffic on the roads I think a lot of people have abandoned the stay at home advice. We will see if that has any detrimental effect on the pandemic. Who’d be in leadership though, having to give advice and make judgement calls?

Our bible passage is the recollections of John in his gospel of what is known as Jesus’s farewell message to his disciples. What advice he gave them as he was about to leave them and be crucified. Many of these verses have become straplines for us as Christians as we live life without the physical presence of Jesus but instead relying on his spiritual presence.

***15****‘If you love me, keep my commands.*

***16****And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever –****17****the Spirit of truth.*

***27****Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*

*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

Jesus says he will give his Spirit to guide us into truth and help us in his way.

In the last few months many people who don’t go to church have tuned in online to church services. It suggests a spiritual hunger out there.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor questions the various reasons people give for the decline of mainline churches such as music in worship, inept clergy, or too much investment in institutional survival. In Taylor’s experience, we should look more closely at the intellectualization of the church. She believes people want, “Not more *about* God but *More God*.” From the youngest to the oldest, we experience “more God” through Spirit-filled community where love is given free expression and prayer and study informs action and vice versa.

I think she is on to something. Even in our so-called secular society people still have a spiritual hunger.

I’ve been reading an article about the Book of Revelation and the writer says that when you read Revelation much of the time in the book people refuse to change in the face of war, pandemics and disasters. They shake their fists at God for daring to shake them out of their complacency and comfort (9.20-12). But at times when the church rises up to proclaim a loving God is at work behind the events in the news, non-believers reinterpret those experiences and repent, come to faith in God (11.3-13). To put it in Covid 19 terms: they begin to view the virus as a vaccine - a tiny taste of hell to fill their hearts with a longing for heaven – a true and everlasting hope and the presence of God.

In this passage in John 14, Jesus says he will give the gift of the Spirit to his disciples. He has promised to send us his own spirit, his own breath, his own inner life. They will not be left without encouragement. In this promise, the text hints at the meaning of the Spirit’s gift given at Pentecost. The Spirit comes as a gift from God, just as John’s gospel earlier portrayed Jesus as God’s gift (3:16). God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Now God gives the Spirit.

A definition of a Christian is not just someone who follows Jesus Christ but someone who has also received his Spirit, his gift, who helps the disciple follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

In verse 16 Jesus names the Spirit with the Greek word *parakletos*. The word could be translated as helper, or counsellor, or comforter or advocate.

The word can be translated as ‘helper’ or comforter. Comfort is a strange and wonderful thing. Have you noticed how when someone is deeply distressed, say after a bereavement or a tragedy, the fact of having other people with them, hugging them and being alongside them, gives them strength for the next moment, then the one after that, then the one after that? What has been difficult in this pandemic is not being able to hug people or even shake their hands. We are trying to find new ways of comforting others.

Outwardly nothing has changed. The tragedy is still a tragedy. The dead person won’t be coming back. But other human support changes our ability to cope with disaster. It gives us strength. Hope in God through Christ is the greatest strength I would argue. When the Spirit is spoken of as the ‘comforter’, this kind of extra strength to meet special need is in mind. Jesus later says he gives a peace that the world cannot give.

Brian is one of our church members and he’s not well at the moment. He should have been seen by a doctor many weeks ago but because of the pandemic that was delayed. He ended up being admitted into hospital with some urgency and concern the other week. Brian said to me, and has agreed to me sharing his story, that he was naturally anxious about going into hospital in the present situation. Yet he prayed for God’s help and sensed, quite extraordinarily, the peace of God come on him. He felt he was in God’s hands. He said on the ward he was on the other patients all looked fearful and anxious. He tried to share his Christian hope with them but they wouldn’t receive it. But for him it was wonderful knowing the peace of God at that time. Brian is now home, thank God, and we continue to hold him in prayer.

 An equally good translation of the word parakletos is ‘advocate’. An advocate stands up in court of law and explains to the judge or jury how things are from his or her client’s point of view. The advocate pleads the case. Jesus assumes that his followers will often find themselves, as he found himself, on the wrong side of official persecution.

Jesus saw the situation, as centuries of Jewish tradition had done before him, in terms of the heavenly law court with God as the judge. In that court, his people can rest assured that their case will be heard, that God will constantly be reminded of their plight, because the spirit will plead on their behalf. (Paul says much the same in Romans 8.26-27)

There’s been a lot of discussion about whether schools should reopen. Universities and secondary schools are definitely closed until the autumn. I know some students are having to do online exams at the moment. Open book exams – because no one can see what help they are getting! Here’s a story about a student called Steve who was taking a challenging class in maths. The course and teacher were known for exacting and demanding exams. The final exam was looming, and the teacher mercifully told the class that each student would be permitted to bring in a single sheet of paper with as much information as they could put on that one sheet for help during the test.

On exam day, each student came to class clutching their precious pieces of paper with as much information as possible. Some students had crammed lines and lines of font so tiny and so numerous onto that single sheet that you had to wonder how they could read it. But Steve walked in with a single blank sheet and a friend who was a senior student and who had an ‘A \*’ in maths. Steve bent down and placed that single, blank sheet of paper on the floor next to his desk. His expert friend stood on the paper.

The professor noticed the extra body in the room and asked what he was doing. Steve piped up, “You said we could bring in whatever we could fit on a single piece of paper for help on this test, well, this is my help and he can fit on the paper!”

He had followed the instructions to the letter and was the only student in that class to score an ‘A’ since he had his expert friend standing alongside him.

The Holy Spirit is like that friend, standing alongside us, supporting us, and guiding us.

Think of the Holy Spirit in this way, as a quiet, whispering teacher of the commandments of Jesus. Often the Spirit is advertised in flashier terms: The Spirit gives ecstasy; the Spirit evokes speaking in unknown tongues; the Spirit prompts dramatic and miraculous healings. Indeed, the Holy Spirit of God does perform such deeds, but these are all derivative of the one, primary activity of the Spirit -- reminding the children of God about everything that Jesus taught and commanded (John 14:26), whispering the gospel lyrics into the ears of the forgetful faithful.

Not a day goes by when I’m not sending up a prayer saying Lord, help me with this. What should I say? How should I act? What should I decide? Then be open to the prompting of the Spirit. He may speak through another person, through reading a passage from the bible, or give you a mental picture or word, or an inner feeling or conviction. It takes practice and sometimes advice from more experienced friends, but this is the promise of Jesus to give us the helper, the advocate, the counsellor.

If you been following the Prayer Course or reading the book How to Pray there are relevant sections in there about listening prayer – listening for the promptings of the Spirit.

As our Counsellor, sometimes the Spirit may also bring conviction to us about how we live our lives, maybe how we hurt others by our actions and speech – whether intended or not. The Spirit’s work will be to conform us to the image of Christ – sometimes that’s painful, but always that’s motivated out of love.

As the Spirit of truth the Spirit will give us a passion for truth and justice – God’s passion for righting the wrongs in the world. At the end of this Christian Aid week we keep our eyes open for the injustice and inequality in the world – especially those leaders using the coronavirus as a cover to do unjust things whilst everyone is distracted and preoccupied with the urgent business of life and death.

The last three verses of this section present a wonderful circle of promises that are ours because of Jesus being with us by the Spirit. We will see him, plain to the eye of faith. We will live with this new life. We will know the deepest theological knowledge of all: that he and the Father are ‘in’ each other, and that we are ‘in’ him and he ‘in’ us. And we will be joined to Jesus and the Father by an unbreakable bond of love. This, in turn, leads us back to where the sequence began. He will show himself to us.

I read something rather odd the other day: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home."

Maybe you’re fearful of going out at the moment – of trying to get back to work, to school. Maybe the isolation is getting to you and you feel alone.

The life of faith can be like that: doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like branches on the vine-or like climbers tied to the rope-tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you." I am in the Father and the Father is in me and I am in you.

We are tied together in the Spirit. Which is always difficult when some people in the church seem to be drifting away from the rest of the body because we are still in some way connected to each other through the Spirit.

One final story. I know parents of young children are having a hard time, especially single parents. Keep going guys!

One single parent mother was trying to put her three-year-old son to bed for a nap.

When she was unsuccessful, she put him in her bed and laid down with him to encourage him to rest. She fell asleep, but he didn't. When she woke up, she saw him sitting on a chair at the end of the bed, and asked, "Luke, what are you doing?"

"I'm playing God," he replied.

"Playing God?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm watching over you while you sleep."

Children understand more than we do sometimes. God IS watching over us. Jesus gave that promise here in talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Not only will God watch over us but through the presence and reminder of the Holy Spirit, we will be reminded of what it means to "Love Jesus and keep his commands." And God will help us to create the environment of love, grace, faith and security that we need for our homes and our church today. Our challenge is to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, listen and trust our helper, comforter, counsellor, advocate and guide.

**Prayer**

*A personal prayer of thanksgiving.*

Thank you, Lord, for the…[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sorry, Lord, this feels a bit like when my mother used to make me write thank-you letters to relatives at Christmas and birthdays, when I wasn’t really sure what I was thankful for.

It’s not that your gift looks like one of those jumpers that Aunty Ruth knitted for me with a head hole I can’t fit my head through, one arm twice as long as the other and a picture of a tiger on the front!

And it’s not that your gift is like one of those unidentifiable but really useful gadgets from Uncle Bob, where the instruction book would take me three weeks solid reading to plough through.

On the contrary – your gift almost seems too simple: Helper; Advocate; Intercessor; Counsellor; Intermediary; Comforter; Spirit of Truth.

Thank you for your gift.

It’s just that…
I’m not sure what to do with it!
You said: ‘You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.’

Maybe that is the answer.
Alongside me.
Within me.
I need to let things simply be;
not overthink things;
and trust that, when the time is right,
your Spirit will show me the way
to love and care and be alongside others
in their hour of need.
You said: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.’
I promise,
I will.

By the love of the oneness of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
I promise I will accept your gift
and live out your love.
Thank you.
Amen.

**Prayers of intercession**

Dear Lord, we bring into your love
those who do not know you and your love;
those who have turned away from you;
those who struggle to accept you;
those who refuse to listen.
May your love touch them,
and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love
those who need parental love;
those who are alone;
those who are abused;
those who are neglected.
May your love touch them,
and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love
those who seek the truth;
those who work in the justice system;
those who campaign and advocate on behalf of the voiceless.
May your love touch them,
and transform their lives.

May we show the power and presence of your love in our church,
our community and our world – for Jesus’ sake.
Amen.

**HYMN: Love Divine**

**Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.**

**Come almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.**

**Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and Praise.**

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**A prayer for all ages together**

***Hold your hands together in prayer;*
*then hold your arms around yourself as if being hugged.*
Thank you, Lord God, for your love.

*Hold your hands together in prayer;*
*then stretch your arms in front of you.*
Help us, Jesus, to love.

*Hold your hands together in prayer;*
*blow into them.*
Come to me, Spirit of truth.

**

**A sending out prayer**

**Go in peace and the power of the Spirit,**

**to live in love,
to show God’s love,
to receive God’s love
– everywhere, and at all times.
Amen.**

1. Tim Lowe, Roots on the web 17th May 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)