

Sunday 7th July

Isaiah 66:10-14

Galatians 6:1-16

Luke 10:1-11; 16-20

Who will walk with us now?

Two weeks ago we were in Tobermory on the Island of Mull, and we went along to the Parish Church on Sunday morning.

During the service, we learned that the much loved minister of the church had just a few weeks before been tragically killed in a walking accident in the highlands.

The church was clearly in a state of shock. A state of bereavement. The grief and sadness were palpable.

We read in the church newsletter of a minister who saw his role as minister to the community, not just the congregation. And how as part of that he would each year climb Ben More – the highest mountain on Mull – with the year 7 children of the school as part of them getting to know each other at the start of their secondary education.

On hearing of his death, one of the children poignantly asked the question “Who will walk with us now?”

And although that question was probably asked in a literal sense, it was clearly a question in the hearts and minds of many in that church and that community. Who would walk with them now? How would this tragedy affect their faith and their lives? How would they cope without him?

And perhaps that’s a question we have had to face up to in our lives. Perhaps through bereavement, perhaps through a change in circumstances – a divorce or separation, a move, retirement – whatever. Who will walk with us now?

Facing up to the challenges of life. The challenges of faith. The challenges of absence.

I often wonder how it must have been for the first Christians. They had had the great privilege of walking with Jesus, of listening to him, of learning from him, of following his example and hearing his wisdom. And yet now they faced the great challenge of speaking about him, witnessing to him and spreading the message after his death, resurrection and ascension. Essentially they had to come to terms with that same question as they faced the future without him. Who would walk with them now?

And the answer, as we have been hearing about over the past few weeks, is that they were not left alone. God sent his Spirit to be with them. His life and breath within them; his power and presence with them. It was as if Jesus himself, through the spirit living within them, was still there. Alongside them, teaching them, encouraging them, supporting them.

In our gospel reading we have the story of how Jesus began to prepare his followers for life after him and without him. We read of him choosing 70 of his followers – these were not the inner circle of the 12, but others who had heard him speak and realised his message was important and life changing for them and for the world. We read of him choosing these 70 and sending them ahead of him. To proclaim the message of peace, to speak of the coming Kingdom and to perform acts of power in his name. He was in effect getting them ready for what was to come; showing them that they were not totally dependent on him being physically alongside them. He was showing them that there would be times when they would have to step forward in faith. Trust in God, take that step into the unknown and the uncomfortable, trusting that the known and comforting God – through his Spirit – would be with them.

And when they returned, we hear of their joy and excitement as they tell of what had happened. Their joy and excitement as they realised that even when it seemed they were alone, they had the power and presence of God with them as they proclaimed the message and shared his peace.

But that of course was then. 2000 years ago. A particular situation that isn't the same as ours. What about now; what about in our time of abandonment, in our time of change or challenge? Who will walk with us now?

Well, of course the Holy Spirit will be with us. The message of Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit - is a truth for all time and all places. God's breath in us, his life in us, his power in us. But sometimes this is hard for us to see or appreciate. How can we be sure and how can we experience this power and presence?

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the prophet Isaiah, and it paints a picture of God as a God who is a bit like a mother. A mother who comforts her child, who loves and nurses her child. Perhaps we are surprised to find such a female image of God; maybe it challenges our assumptions and perhaps prejudices. But its there in scripture. And not just here in Isaiah, of course, but elsewhere in the bible.

And also, as we heard the other week, the word used in scripture for spirit –ruach – is a feminine word. Perhaps the spirit - otherwise known as the comforter – is better suited to this female imagery.

Imagine the Spirit of God then as a mother, tenderly caring for you, comforting and nursing you, encouraging you to grow and become the independent and individual person you were always meant to be. Giving you freedom to try things for yourself; giving you opportunities to flourish and thrive, but always being there to catch you and help you if you need.

You could ask the question as you are given these opportunities and this freedom – who will walk with me now – or you could trust that your mother God is there just behind you; watching over you, urging you on and ready to embrace you and support you if necessary.

But this is not all.

Our New testament reading from Paul's letter to the young church in Galatia tells us more. He is writing to a church that had turned away from his teaching that we are all one; a church that had reopened the old divide between Jew and non-Jew. And he urges a unity, and a mutual support.

He talks in ch 5 of the fruit of the spirit. If you really have the spirit of God within you, he says, this is the kind of life you will be leading. Just as an apple tree produces apples, so will you – if the spirit is within you – produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. And in the section we read this morning, we see that this fruit includes mutual support. "Bear one another's burdens". A phrase which is tempered by the seeming contradiction just a few verses later "All must carry their own loads". But Paul is talking about a balance. Yes, be ready to support and help each other when needed, but don't place an unhealthy reliance on others when you are perfectly capable of looking after yourself.

So what Paul seems to be saying in response to the question "Who will walk with me now" is that the church will be your companion. You can and must support each other in these times of hardship and challenge. Part of the Christian calling is this mutual support and encouragement. This is part of the spirit's fruit in the lives of Christians.

So those people on Mull in their grief and alone-ness may be asking that question "who will walk with us now?"

It may be a question you have asked or are asking now.

And we have seen how it can be answered. God through his spirit is with us; The mothering, nursing, encouraging, comforting God is with us. It may not seem that way, but she is.

And one of the ways this is most often demonstrated and experienced is through the lives of other Christians (and other people) who help us through the hard times. Through those who are God's love and presence and help in our times of loneliness and need.

Right at the beginning of the Bible, in the creation stories of Genesis, God says to the human he has created – it is not good for you to be alone. That truth still holds today, and God through his spirit and through the lives and actions of others makes sure that we are not alone. Who will walk with us now – God will through his spirit and through his people.