

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	10 May 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Sixth Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

On the Sundays of Eastertide, we read excerpts from chapters fourteen to seventeen of St John's Gospel. They take us back in time before Easter, to Maundy Thursday, and Jesus' last words at his last supper. Given that he was facing imminent crucifixion, every word is charged with meaning. John's Gospel is in any case one of the most sublime books in the Bible. Vanessa told us last week why, traditionally, it is symbolised by the eagle: because the Fourth Gospel soars on high yet is also firmly rooted in the earth. This Gospel begins in heaven - 'In the beginning was the Word' - yet it also tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us. We should expect then that this Word will have something very significant to tell us.

In this wonderful Gospel, these chapters - fourteen to seventeen - are perhaps the most wonderful of all. If you don't know them do get out a Bible at home and read them: they are pure revelation. As he goes toward his terrible death, Jesus, God's Word to us, tells us who he is and why he has come, who his Father is, and that there is also a Holy Spirit who is yet to come.

It was hardly news to the Hebrews that God had a word and a spirit. They knew that when God created the world, he did it by his word - speaking all things into being - and that he breathed life into them by his spirit. They sang in the psalms, as we still do in this cathedral: 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made: and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth.'

They never imagined however that God's Word would become human or that God's breath would be revealed on Pentecost Sunday, the fiftieth day after the resurrection of Christ, as a distinct person. All that was God's revelation, his unveiling of who he really is, in his own inner life.

Because of this revelation made through Jesus, the Church created a new word – the word 'Trinity' – to describe this God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while yet remaining the one God of Israel. 'Trinity' means 'three-in-one and one-in-three.' It's a clunky word, but it's the best one we have for circling around the mystery of the one God's self-revelation to us.

Indeed, the sheer clunkiness of so many words used in theology can even be an advantage. It's a good reminder that no human words can ever capture the full mystery of God, who is unspeakably greater than anything we can think or say. But behind those clunky words lies sublime poetry, the witness of St John's Gospel. In these chapters, Jesus unfolds the mystery of God as Holy Trinity, in all its beauty.

Significantly, his first words are about love: if you love me, he says, you will keep my commandments. Jesus was not teaching dry or abstract ideas – the stuff of head-knowledge. Rather he was unfolding the mystery at the heart of God, whom he revealed as a communion of love, the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That calls for a deeper kind of knowledge on our part - heart-knowledge, the wisdom of experience.

God's love is never dry or abstract. It will lead Jesus to the cross. So too, our love should never be dry or abstract, a mere matter of theory or high-minded wishes: our love must be proved by our deeds. Jesus says therefore that if we really love him, we must keep his commandments. He promises that consequences will follow if we do that. God the Father will show his love for us because we love the Son. But he assures us of even more: he will ask the Father to

give us another advocate, to be with us for ever. That expression 'another advocate' reminds us that Jesus himself is our original advocate. Why therefore do we need another one – isn't he enough?

'Advocate' is an interesting word. It suggests something legal, a counsel for the defence, speaking up for a defendant in court. The Greek word used in the New Testament is *paraklitos* – which became 'paraclete' in English. In some of our English hymns we call the Holy Spirit 'the Paraclete.'

It's a very rich Greek word because while it did have the sense of someone who speaks up for you in a court of law, it also had a wider range of meanings. It meant something more basic: one who stands by you – a support, a protector, a counsellor. It could also mean 'comforter' though using that term nowadays might risk turning God into a child's cuddly toy or a security blanket. But Jesus was hardly reducing God to that. Instead, he seems to mean that the Holy Spirit will be God standing by us, standing with us, and even being in us. That is precisely why we need another advocate as well as Jesus, why the Holy Spirit will be with us 'for ever.' Jesus himself was about to be taken away in death and after his resurrection would finally depart from the world physically at his ascension, a festival we will be celebrating very soon.

Because he was going away therefore, he promised them - and us - that he would not leave us orphaned. He would send us another standby. In the coming of the Holy Spirit, God would be present to them and us in new and fresh ways, and not just for a limited period of time but forever. The Spirit would be our standby - standing by the Church, standing by each one of us - until the end of time.

In these final weeks of Eastertide, that promise - the coming of the Holy Spirit – will be heard over again in our worship. We will sing and pray, 'Come Holy Spirit' asking the risen Lord Jesus, enthroned

at the right of hand of the Father, to keep his promise and pour out the Spirit on us afresh, as he poured it out at Pentecost.

We cannot exaggerate the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Church. One of the greatest Anglian preachers, John Henry Newman, preaching in Oxford, once made a bold but true assertion. Everything that is essential in the Christian Church, Newman insisted, depends directly on the Holy Spirit - preaching, worship, ministry, the celebration of the sacraments especially Holy Communion, the Church's very life – all depend completely on the power of the Holy Spirit.

To fill us with the Holy Spirit. That was why Christ came at Christmas, why he was crucified on Good Friday, why he rose from the dead at Easter and why he ascended into heaven. It was so that the Father would pour out through him the fullness of the Holy Spirit on the Church, on you, and on me. Jesus does not leave us orphans. He comes back to us with his Father, invisibly but really, in the gift of their Holy Spirit – in our worship certainly, but also in our everyday lives.

As we enter these last weeks of Eastertide and begin to look toward Pentecost let this be our continual prayer: 'Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts, and kindle afresh in us the fire of your love.' Amen.