

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
*St Mary and St Nicholas, Wilton, 2023*

*Acts 17:22-31*  
*John 14:15-21*

Alleluia! Christ is risen.  
**He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

‘You know the Spirit of God, because he abides with you, and he will be with you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.’

Today’s reading from the Gospel according to St John contains one of my favourite New Testament words: ‘abide’. Jesus tells the disciples that someone is coming to be with them. This person, described in today’s reading as the Advocate, or the Comforter - the Greek word is *parakleton*, from where we get that lovely word Paraclete, which crops up in some of the older hymns that we still sing. All of the words are pretty much interchangeable, and all of them mean someone who is going to be alongside us as a supporter and encourager - Jesus tells the disciples that this Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is going to come to be with them, and to *abide* with them.

I just love that word, abide. It conveys so much more than just being somewhere, doesn’t it? You don’t often say, ‘oh yes on the night before I fly out to America I’m going to abide in the Travelodge’. Other overnight accommodation solutions are available. Abiding carries with it something of permanence, something of commitment, of course something too, of emotion. Abiding feels compassionate. Abiding feels quite a ‘commitmenty’ sort of word. And it is abiding that Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit is going to do with the disciples.

And I don’t know about you but whenever I hear the word abide my mind automatically goes to Henry Francis Lyte’s famous hymn, ‘Abide with me’, most often sung to William Henry Monk’s beautiful tune, Eventide. If this was a service of Evensong I’m pretty sure that Mark would have chosen ‘Abide with me’ for us to sing today, though it would be pretty perverse to sing it in the full glare of the mid-morning sun.

It’s a hymn of extraordinary confidence that it is really true: that by his Holy Spirit, God really does abide with us. In other words, that God has committed in compassion to be where we are for the long haul. Not to pop in for the night as though we were a Travelodge, a quick stop on the way to somewhere more interesting and important, but to put down roots. To throw in his lot with us if you like, to abide with us for ever.

‘Abide with me’ was written when Henry Francis Lyte was dying of tuberculosis in 1879, which makes the prayer that he comes up with even more moving and profound really. And I’m absolutely sure that he is picking up on all of the themes from today’s gospel reading. Because we need to remember that these are Jesus’s words to the disciples before he is arrested, tried, crucified, and buried. Although we almost always read these words in Eastertide, as we are doing today, the disciples were hearing them before what were probably the two or three worst days of their lives. They were about to see their friend betrayed, put through the travesty of a showcase trial in the court of public opinion, die the most horrific death that the Romans had concocted, and then be buried in a hurry in a tomb they borrowed from some other bloke. Their entire world was about to crash down around their ears. And Jesus plants this seed of comfort, this promise of abiding. ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.’

And he is talking about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit whom our translation referred to as ‘he’, although the Hebrew word

and the Greek word that we translate as Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit are both feminine interestingly. But either way, we need to notice that Jesus is talking about a *person*. Not a thing. Not a power or an energy like Lucozade or something. Jesus is talking about a person. The person who we would recognise now as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit.

And our readings have really stopped pointing backwards to the bodily resurrection of Jesus at Easter now, and they've moved to pointing forwards towards Whitsunday. Towards Pentecost, in a fortnight's time. Because the two are completely connected.

Jesus is raised bodily from the dead at Easter, he ascends bodily into heaven on Ascension Day, which is this Thursday, and far from leaving us abandoned, far from leaving us orphaned, in the words of the gospel reading, we are given an even closer Presence. We are given an Advocate. A Comforter. Who will abide with us forever. And not only with us, but in us.

Interweaving his or her very existence with ours. Think about how a plait works in someone's hair, or how rope is made with individual strands weaving around and in and out of each other. That is what can happen to our soul, as we open ourselves up to the abiding of the Holy Spirit, the promise and gift of the ascended Christ. We start to weave a plait. We start to weave a rope that is partly us and partly God. And that is the work of soul making. That is our calling. To become divine. To become more like God. We begin that work now, here on earth, and it is perfected on the other side of the grave. At the point where we are completely abiding in the perfect Presence of the Trinity.

I was thinking about that a lot last week when I buried a dear friend of mine. It came home to me most clearly towards the end of the Eucharistic Prayer when we got that bit where the saints were named, and for the first time my friend's name was included there. Because he had passed into that perfect abiding that the saints and angels now enjoy, and that urges us on while we are here on earth.

That promise of abiding is in stark contrast to the altar to the unknown God that Paul finds in Athens. It's hard to tell quite how sarcastic Paul is being in this reading from Acts. One of the older translations clearly thinks he is being very sarcastic, because it translates the text, 'Athenians, I see how very superstitious indeed you are'. But either way, Paul's point is that we don't need to pin our hopes on something unseen and unknown. Because we know Christ. And if we know Christ we know what God is like. And so we know who is coming to abide with us. Because the Holy Spirit is God as well.

Lots of the hymn books leave out several verses of Abide with me, because the editors think they are too personal. Which I think is ironic. Because the whole point is that this relationship *is* personal. This is verse three of the original, and is worth remembering that at the point where Lyte was writing, the word 'condescending' hadn't become completely attached to the negative aspect. Condescending just means coming down, and of course that is very 'Holy Spirit' word:

Not brief glance I beg, a passing word  
but as thou dwellest with thy disciples Lord,  
familiar, condescending, patient, free,  
come not to sojourn but abide with me.

So comes God. Not for eight hours at the Travelodge before moving on to something better. But to *abide*. To *commit*. To walk the rest of the way with us. Such is the promise of Easter. Such is the promise of Ascension. Such is the promise of Whitsun. As Lyte concludes another of the omitted verses: 'thou hast not left me, oft as I left thee. On to the close, O Lord, abide with me.'

A! XP.