

So our readings today tell us that God yearns to be *with* his people. It's an abiding theme in both the Old and New Testaments. And three days ago, the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, the worldwide Church observed the festival of 'Corpus Christi' – the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion. It is through Communion, of course, that we are assured of our 'common union' *with* our risen and ascended Lord.

Now Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, considers the word 'with' to be the most important word in theology. At Christmas we celebrate the Incarnation, coming of Emmanuel – God *with* us – whilst at Pentecost, two weeks ago, we celebrated the coming of God's unlimited presence *with* us by his Holy Spirit. God always wants to be with us, and God wants to be with us for ever.

In today's first reading we heard how Adam and Eve in the Garden had tried to hide themselves from the presence of God, but God had called out, 'Where are you?'. Sam Wells invites us to see in this not an accusation, but rather God saying 'I want to be with you'.

And just like Adam and Eve, we see so many people today doing all they can to squeeze God out of their lives. If we are honest, we see it in our own lives, too. Sam Wells dares even to suggest that some forms of contemporary worship seem to try to be 'more interesting than God'!

But God, if we would only stop and notice him, is deeply interesting. And yet, whilst he always wants to be with us he will never impose himself upon us. Think about how we experience his gentle presence through the Holy Spirit. In Hebrew, the words for 'spirit' and 'wind' are synonymous, so when we see the leaves of a tree being rustled by the wind we see the presence of the Spirit of God, yearning to be with us. God, the creator of the universe, is that close to us, but he does not overwhelm us.

So next time we feel that God is saying to us, 'where are you?' we should not hear that as an accusation but rather as his deep desire to be with us, to delight in our company. For ever.

In our second reading, St Paul speaks of the 'spirit of faith' and also 'the earthly tent we live in'. Paul, who happened to make tents for a living, is actually alluding to the literal translation of St John's unfolding of the mystery of the Incarnation, the message of Christmas. Not, 'the Word became flesh and lived among us...', but rather '...he pitched his tent *with* us'.

So listen again to what St Paul is saying. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house... not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'.

Surely, God is of deep interest (and wonder) to us!

Another saying from St Paul, well known to us all is 'the grace'. We know too that an alternative form is this, 'May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *communion* of the Holy Spirit be with us all.' *With* again! Since Trinity Sunday last Sunday we have been thinking about that fellowship of love which characterises the Trinity, spilling over to include us and drawing us in to a 'common union' with God. In fact, we can see this in what Jesus was saying in our gospel reading today. By baptism we become a new creation; we live 'in Christ' and he in us. We become brothers and sisters in Christ of one extended family, the Church.

As disciples of Christ we are called to grow in faith and understanding of all that this means. Not only that, we are called to invite others to join us, to enter in to the common union we share; to enable God to be *with* others through us. We can only do this through following the example given to us by the Son of God himself: through love in action. Our words and our deeds are to speak of God's love for *all* people, of his wish to draw them in to the abundance of life eternal *with* him. That's the basis of our Vision here at St Mary's: *to be a people and place where love works*.

Now, as we prepare to move to the final step in the easing of lockdown we can at last begin again as a church to make plans, plans to realise our vision; plans for growth. Last month, our PCC met for an Away Day to look to the future, and consider where our priorities should lie.

We recognised that because of the constant need over the last year to adapt to rapid changes in government guidelines we been unable to make any strategic plans. We also noted that at the last PCC Away Day, which was two years ago, we had agreed:

1. Our Vision must dovetail in to the Diocesan Vision
2. The Strategy we use to realise our Vision must make the best use of our finite resources
3. We cannot do everything at once! A sustainable step-by-step approach is required.

And to optimise the use of our resources a Team Structure was proposed, covering the following areas of church life [think of an aeroplane in steady flight]:

Our direction is our Purpose – Worship and Prayer,

Our wings represent our Outreach – Mission and Community Engagement
(word and action) which must be in balance,

Our energy – or propulsion – comes from our Growth – in Discipleship and in Pastoral Care,

and our support – or lift – comes from our Infrastructure – Finance, Buildings, and Administration.

In each of these areas, Worship and Prayer, Outreach, Discipleship and Pastoral Care, and Infrastructure, a list of priorities for the coming year had been agreed.

Back in 2019, the PCC had then begun consulting our whole church family, to decide on the order of these priorities, and to see how each of us could be playing a part in St Mary's becoming: *a people and a place where love works*.

We soon realised that in order to progress we would need to draw new people in to the church family: we simply did not have the 'critical mass' required. And then we all went in to lockdown!

As we now emerge from lockdown, this remains the case. We are of course now in a very different landscape, which means that we will need even more than before to pool resources with the other churches in Richmond and across the Deanery, and to draw from new resources being made available by our Diocese.

But the lockdown clearly underlined the central place that St Mary's – the community and the building – occupies in the life of the wider community. We can see that, for example, community engagement, a relaunch of the Friends of St Mary's, and making the building more of a community resource will be key factors in our future as the parish church of Richmond with Hudswell. Alongside this we must re-establish our core traditions (such as music and singing) and refresh our pattern of services and social events to attract new people.

The PCC will be discussing these things further so that detailed proposals can be made, and then invite us all to become involved in planning and delivering our future growth.

We are living in 'interesting times', but also in a common union *with* our 'interesting' God. By his Spirit we can be sure he will guide us and empower us; we are members together of the Body of Christ; we have nothing to fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.