

Company is Coming

John 14:19-29

May 13, 2007

I.

Today's Gospel tells us that company is coming. Visitors are on the way. We can have some new roommates. Jesus said, "those who love me will keep my word, and the Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them."

Finally, is the veil drawn aside? Is the mystery solved? After all of the preaching you have ever heard, do we finally have the answer? Is it as simple as "love me and keep my word, and we will come and live with you and be part of your life." A sermon on that wonderful possibility could almost deliver itself.

And in a world of theological uncertainties and complexities, in a time of division and controversy within the church, don't we want some clear answers, some central principles that are at the heart of it all?

Today's Gospel gives the formula. "Love me and keep my word" equals "We will come and live with you and be part of your life." If the people do "X," God will do "Y." That seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

Maybe. Maybe not. As often is the case with Jesus' teachings, simple answers are not so simple when we try to put them into practice. When we look at the world, and at society, and even at the church, we see that this part of the Gospel is not always a guiding principle in contemporary life.

And the problem seems to be with the first part of the formula. The difficulty is with "X," loving Jesus and keeping his word. The part about "Y," God coming to live with us and being part of our lives, probably is pretty trustworthy and reliable.

II.

But before we actually get into what Jesus meant when he told the disciples how to live a holy life, it could be helpful to understand the setting in which he said it.

Today's Gospel comes at the very end of the Last Supper, after Jesus celebrated the Eucharist, after he washed the disciples' feet, and after Judas Iscariot left the room for the ultimate betrayal. If the reading had been two verses longer, we would have heard Jesus say, "rise, let us be on our way," as he left to enter the Garden and later be arrested.

So, today's reading was indeed Jesus' final word to the disciples before he died. He saw the need to reassure them about the future. He wanted to prepare them for life after he was gone, and he offered a vision of the future shaped by God's promises. He called them to live lives based not on his absence, but rather on God's presence. And he invoked all three persons of the Trinity as he also told them the Father would send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to guide and help them.

Jesus' words put everything in place. He gave them the answers. He revealed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in their purpose and mission. And he promised there would be a new and intimate relationship between the triune God and the community of believers, which includes us today. We will hear more about this promise in three weeks on Trinity Sunday as we look in detail at how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other, and their roles in human history.

III.

With that background, we can see how today's Gospel reading is arranged. Jesus spoke to the disciples in a such a way that his words naturally flowed from one step to the next, in a natural sequence. His message has three basic parts.

The first consists of Jesus' instructions, and his promises of blessings to those who follow. The second was his revelation of the means to carry out those instructions through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the third was his assurance, by leaving his peace behind, that those who were obedient would never be separated from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ.

Each of these parts not only carried meaning and wisdom for the disciples, but they also speak to us today as we try to live Christian lives. Let's briefly look at them in a little more detail.

In the first part, Jesus made a direct connection between loving him and keeping his commandments. The message was that if we love him our obedience will follow, and that our obedience would be the natural result of our love. And he proclaimed that the Father has a special love for those who love the Son, and they will be blessed by God's indwelling within them.

The order of things is clear. First we must love Jesus in order to keep his commandments. But we will not be able to do unless we first have that kind of devotion to him. Our love of Jesus is what naturally leads to our obedience.

But how do we go about loving Jesus? And what kind of love do we mean? Well, John's Gospel was written in Greek, and the Greeks have three different words for love.

The first is *eros*, which is romantic love or passion. That's not what Jesus meant. The second is *philia*, which refers to friendship and loyalty to family and friends. That also is not what he meant. The third is *agape*, which is how Jesus used the term. He was describing a self-sacrificing, unconditional, all-giving spiritual expression of trust and faith in him and his teachings and promises. When Jesus said to love him, he meant to trust him, to have faith in him.

For some people that might be more spontaneous or intuitive than others. But for most of us it is not something we can just dial up on demand. We cannot force ourselves to love Jesus, to have faith in him, any more than we can force ourselves to stop coughing. Love, in the sense of trust or faith, usually does not happen in a flash bang moment. It develops over time as we hold ourselves in his presence and he, who knows our weaknesses, draws us to him.

If we do love Jesus in this way, we can keep his commandments as he instructed us. In fact, it is the only way we can keep his commandments. Jesus does not intend that we just have some abstract feeling of good-will toward him. He also calls us to carry out those feelings in our lives. He wants us to actually do the things he taught us to do.

And those commandments are found throughout the Gospels. They are not the Old Testament Ten Commandments that can be measured with some degree of exactitude, although they include them. Jesus' commandments are more spiritual and deal with attitudes of the heart.

You have heard them before. Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbors as yourselves. Do not store up treasures on earth. Forgive others as God forgives you. Do not judge others. Remember him as we celebrate the Eucharist. Remove the log in your own eye before you worry about the speck in someone else's. There are many more we could mention.

But how do we keep the commandments? In many ways the Christian life is not the natural order of things. In many ways humanity is in rebellion against God. This means we have be intentional as we overcome our basic instincts and try to follow the path that Christ has laid out

for us. We cannot do it alone, and this leads into the second part of today's reading, which is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus also said the Father would send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to teach the disciples and remind them of all that he said. And since everything that Jesus ever said reflected the will of the Father, we also look to the Spirit to guide us in discerning God's will for us in the context of Jesus' teachings.

Think about it. When Jesus was alive he was the revelation of God to the people of the time. But was that revelation to end when Jesus left? Were the people who were alive when Jesus lived the only ones who would actually experience the revelation of God? The answer is "no." One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to continue to reveal God to us. The love of God made known two thousand years ago in Jesus Christ continues to be made known to us today through the Holy Spirit.

How does this work? As the Spirit does God's work among us, we should understand that the Spirit came not only to preserve the continuity of Jesus teachings until his coming again, but also to provide new revelations in the name of the risen Lord as they might apply to new and evolving situations. Thus, the Spirit came not only to reinforce Scripture, but also to provide new guidance in our modern lives in ways that always are in continuity with Jesus life and message.

And Jesus' life and message is the foundation of the third part of today's reading. Jesus said he left us with his peace, not the world's peace. What does this mean?

The world's peace is comfort in worldly things. It is gratification and fulfillment resulting from our accomplishments, our possessions, and our struggles to get ahead. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that kind of peace as long as it is kept in perspective, but that was not what Jesus meant.

Jesus' peace is different. It is not about comfort in our homes or the avoidance of difficulties in life, but rather about confidence in God and the acceptance of God's love. The peace Jesus left was reconciliation with God, something the world could never give. His peace was not merely a good wish, or a cordial departing observation. He left an inward peace, unrelated to the world, based on his union with the Father. He assured us that God's love always would be present in our lives.

IV.

Today's Gospel gave guidance and hope to the disciples, and it does the same for us. We are called to love our Lord and Savior and to keep his commandments, even though at times our human natures get in the way.

Today's Gospel also sets forth the Father's will that we are to be obedient to his Son, and it explains how the Father sent the Holy Spirit to sustain us and strengthen us as we falter. Never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to lift you up when you really need it.

And if we do these things, if we love Jesus and keep his word, then God will dwell within us and transform us into the people we are meant to be. I know that we try to do our best to live into that promise, and I pray that through the Spirit we can continue to receive God's blessings. *Amen.*