

SERMON – SUNDAY BEFORE ASCENSION

Rev Anne Taylor

In the good old days(!) when people could go on foreign holidays, a family were setting off in their car for the ferry. Lists had been written and checked, compromises had been made about how much stuff their two children could bring and yet have room to sit in the car with the dog.

Everything checked, they set off in high spirits and expectation. Happy Days! 20 miles along the motorway, the younger child let out a wail. She had forgotten to bring the old raggedy piece of blanket that she brought with her everywhere – her comfort blanket or “noo-noo” as she called it.

The parents knew that their holiday was going to be ruined if she hadn’t got it. So, they turned off at the next exit and sped home to get it. Luckily they had left in plenty of time to get to the ferry.

It seems that 70% of children have had a comfort blanket, or a cuddly toy, that provides them with a sense of security and reassurance.

It’s part of the process of a child separating from their mother or father. The young child realises that the parent can’t be with them all the time. There are times when they will be left without them and they latch on to a familiar blanket or cuddly toy that stands in for the parent in their absence.

As the child’s confidence grows in the permanence of their parent’s care and love – even if physically absent for a time – the child learns to trust that love, and the need for a comfort blanket lessens. But it can take time – and there are still some adults who won’t be separated from an old cuddly toy, however battered and torn it may be – though that is for sentimental reasons!

Growing up, becoming independent, can for many be a trying, even terrifying experience, requiring a lot of courage and resilience. And that’s what the Ascension of Jesus, which we celebrate next Thursday, meant for the disciples.

In a sense they had to learn to grow up. For 3 years Jesus had been with them, his presence a constant in their lives, supporting them, instructing them, helping them to face difficult situations. But with the Ascension came a definite break, and they were going to be on their own, at least physically speaking. Jesus would no longer be with them in person, they were going to have to learn to stand on their own two feet.

And this process of separation began with the Resurrection. When Mary recognised Jesus in the garden outside the tomb that first Easter morning we read that she stretched out her arms to hold him, but he replied "Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father." After the Resurrection Jesus wasn't with the disciples all the time. He was slowly weaning them off his physical presence, a weaning off which culminates with the Ascension.

But as we read in this morning's Gospel, Jesus promised them that he would not leave them orphaned. He would come to them.

Two things in particular would assure them of his presence with them, spiritually rather than physically – The Holy Spirit and Holy Communion.

In St. Luke's account, Jesus tells them to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them.

The Holy Spirit would be Jesus' presence not only with them but within them, and indeed, so real was their experience of the Holy Spirit that sometimes, they called the Holy Spirit the spirit of Jesus.

The presence of Jesus with us and within - through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not just the voice of conscience, but an inner source of strength and peace, an inner spirit of enlightenment and guidance, an inner spring of love and service – of God and others. The Holy Spirit helped them to grow up and be the church, the body of the risen Christ here on earth.

And the second source of strength and of Jesus' presence with and within them after the Ascension would be Holy Communion, the Eucharist.

At the Last Supper Jesus told them "Do this in remembrance of me". And down the ages the Eucharist has spoken to so many people not only of Jesus' presence and love but has conveyed it in the bread and wine, in the spiritual body and blood of Christ. And as we eat and drink these holy gifts we live in him and he lives in us.

And that is what so many miss. Yes, our morning televised services and our zoom evening services have given us a sense of community, they have kept us together, and now that we can film inside the church we are brought even closer to the source of spiritual comfort and strength.

But how we look forward to the day when we can actually receive communion and be reminded of Jesus' presence, not only in the Holy Spirit but also in the Holy Communion, that tangible token of his love and strength and acceptance to nurture and sustain us. When Ted and I receive in these days we do so not for ourselves but on behalf of our whole worshipping community.

The Ascension was a transitional moment for the disciples. The comfort blanket of his physical presence was taken away. No longer was Jesus around but he was with them and within them through the Holy Spirit and as they met for the breaking of bread. And in that assurance they grew and matured to face the challenges of all that lay ahead. May we likewise be comforted and strengthened by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and we pray before long once again by partaking in the Eucharist within the walls of our spiritual homes.