

Jesus said “I am going away, and I am coming to you.”

Well God’s timing, as always, is impeccable. It’s my last service here at St Peter’s before I go away to get ordained and start my curacy, God willing.

I *won’t* be coming to you for a while, but some of *you* have very kindly said you’ll come visit me in my curacy in Fulham, or at least threatened to do so. And of course I very much look forward to seeing you there heckling me from the back.

I come to this service today with a mix of sadness at moving on; thankfulness for everything I’ve received from you and from God; and excitement about what’s to come.

And the gospel reading today is a real gift, because it holds those emotions for me.

This part of the Gospel of John we’ve just heard is known as Jesus’ Farewell Discourse; his long goodbye to his disciples on the eve of his arrest and suffering. He knows he is going away.

And he says to them:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

These are words that resonate with me, and maybe you too, as St Peter’s moves through a time of change.

But these are also deeply challenging words. Because change, as we know, can be scary.

And moreover, there are many things in the world that do trouble our hearts, and do make us afraid. War and suffering. Climate change. Racism and exclusion and poverty.

And some of us will be facing very personal worries and fears. Fears about money and jobs. Fears about loved ones. Fears about illness and the future.

Do not let your hearts be troubled – is easier said than done. Sometimes it can seem impossible.

But Jesus knows this.

Jesus knew full well that his disciples would face times of uncertainty and hardship.

But he is promising to them, and to us, that throughout the joys and trials of this life, we will never be alone. That God will be with us, always, and God's love will never let us go.

And trusting this gives us the courage and hope we need when we face change and challenge.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

It's the same message that God has always been singing to creation, and we hear it again and again in the bible.

In Genesis, when Hagar the Egyptian slave-woman flees to the desert with her child Ishmael, and he is about to die – God calls her by name, this outcast without power, and says – “Hagar – do not be afraid. I am with you.”

In the Book of Isaiah, which was written down when the Israelites were in captivity and oppressed in Babylon, God declares: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God.”

In the Gospel of Luke, when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to say that *she*, powerless marginal she, will bear God's Aon, he calls her by name and says, "Mary – do not be afraid. The Lord is with you."

That same message which Jesus says to his disciples, and is saying to each of us, now.

And Jesus roots it in the promise of the Holy Spirit.

He tells his disciples: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will be with you, and will teach you everything".

Jesus, who is God the Son come as one of us, to live and teach and heal and die for us, tells the disciples he will be going away.

But God the Spirit remains with us, teaching and guiding us to live in the way of love.

The Spirit is working in us, in all of us, even when we don't realise it. Often through quiet nudges, finding ways to connect us.

When we feel nudged, for no clear reason, to go somewhere, and we find that we're the right

person in the right place at the right time to show someone they are loved – that's the Spirit at work.

When we feel prompted to ask forgiveness, or stand up and call out injustice – that's the Spirit at work.

When we're in pain or feeling broken, but somehow find the strength to keep going – that's the Spirit at work.

She is the one who continues to whisper to us those words of God, "Do not be afraid."

I have seen the Spirit at work in St Peter's so many times.

When I first arrived here I was a bit apprehensive – would it be the right place for me? What are the people like? What am I getting myself into?

There was a slightly shaky start: in the first week somehow I broke the door in the back kitchen so it had to be nailed shut. I probably thought – is God trying to tell me something here?

Well looking back, perhaps the Spirit was telling me something.

Perhaps the Spirit was saying – “do not let your heart be troubled, and do not be afraid. Because God is with you.

You will face ups and downs. You will make mistakes, and get things wrong, and break the door, and say stupid things.

But you will see God working in this place.”

And so it has been. I *have* seen the Spirit at work here.

She is here in times of celebration; when we’ve been dancing madly in the church, and people have come together in joy, barriers broken down.

She is here in Warm Welcome, our community drop-in, where people who would never normally meet have formed new friendships and found new life.

She is here in moments of sadness, or quiet moments, when people going through difficult

times come into the church on the off-chance,  
and they find comfort, or someone to listen.

And the Spirit is here in the eucharist. When  
despite all our fears and worries and pains and  
differences, for one moment we are united by the  
Spirit, sharing in the same bread and same wine.  
Pressing into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Finding the Easter hope, that at the end of all  
things, the suffering and pain and tears will not  
have the final word but God's love will.

So in these coming weeks and months; as St  
Peter's moves forward as a community –  
remember that the Spirit is at work in this place,  
and in each and every one of us.

Help each other to see it. Notice what the Spirit is  
doing in your life, and in each other's lives, and tell  
each other. Pay attention to where she is nudging  
you, and where she wants you to move and act  
and change.

And help each other to trust in that ancient  
whisper from God:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid. I am always with you. My love for you is endless, relentless, and will never let you go.”

**Amen.**