

Sermon preached at King's College, Cambridge: Fifth Sunday after Easter

James 1.22-end

John 16:23b-end

‘Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.’

Each Sunday since Easter we have heard the Gospel of John proclaimed at this Eucharist. Perhaps strangely these readings have not recounted the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus but have been taken mostly from the long conversation between Jesus and his disciples at the last supper — the so-called ‘farewell discourses’. This is because the events of Holy Week are in fact the subject of that conversation: Jesus explains to his disciples the meaning of his death and resurrection before they happen. That Jesus can foretell reality in this fashion is one proof of his divinity. As the prologue of John’s Gospel puts it, nothing happens apart from him and all things come into being through him.

If this chronology is perplexing for us, it was even more confusing for Jesus’ disciples. They complain that Jesus speaks in what the King James Bible calls ‘proverbs’, but might be better translated as ‘figures of speech’, even ‘enigmas’ or ‘riddles’. In the events of Easter, however, the meaning of Jesus’ words become clear, and after he was raised from the dead the disciples remember his words and understand them. This is what Jesus means when he says, ‘the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father’. Today, as we recall Jesus’

words in the light of Easter, we are engaged in the same activity as the disciples.

The sections of the farewell discourses that have been read on previous Sundays have each focussed on a particular aspect of Christ's death and resurrection and what it means for our lives and our relationship with God. The text we have just heard is largely concerned with prayer. Jesus says, 'Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.' So this morning I want to think about what Easter has to do with how we pray, and especially how the events of Easter enable us to pray 'in the name' of Christ.

The structure of Christian prayer is to pray to God the Father in or through Jesus Christ, and we do this in an explicit way during the prayers of intercession at the Eucharist and at Evensong, where often the intercessor will begin by addressing the Father and finish the prayer with a phrase like 'in Jesus' name' or 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. Properly, we do not direct our prayer to Christ, though there are a number of popular and traditional devotions that ask Jesus for assistance and mercy. These, I would argue, are slightly different things. To complete this picture of prayer, we should not leave out the Holy Spirit which, though it is not mentioned in today's gospel, has a significant place in the farewell discourses: namely, the role of the Spirit is to inspire prayer in us. It both stirs us to pray in the first place and guides the exercise of our prayer, so that it is rightly directed to God and to the good. This, then, is the way that we pray to the Father, through or in the name of Christ, inspired by the Spirit. But how do Jesus' death and resurrection enable this kind of prayer?

Earlier in John's Gospel we hear that Christ is sent from the Father to the world out of love for the world, and to give eternal life to all who believe in him. This is what Jesus explains to his disciples over their final meal, and it is also what he reveals at the climax of his ministry on the cross. At Easter we see that God's love is not merely an extraordinary kind of human love, but a love of divine origin. We see this because when it is put to the test, that love, on the one hand, surpasses physical death — Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father's love — and, on the other hand, it transcends ordinary social behaviour — Christ continued to love those who crucified him. In other words, the love of God bypasses the obstructions that prevent us from properly loving one another, both natural barriers such as death and impediments of our own making such as anger, hate and resentment. Transcendent love is the explanation of Jesus' declaration, 'I have overcome the world.'

That Jesus's love has overcome the world is not just good news for Jesus, but for us as well. When we let that love into our own hearts, when we accept that God, working in us, can overcome our fears and will continue to love us even when we do dreadful things and when dreadful things are done to us, then we are bound to God in a special way. In this bond, we and all who from the disciples on have trusted in the mystery of Easter, are united to Christ. The Church has often imagined such unity as a marriage: in the Christian understanding of holy matrimony the lover and beloved are unified, becoming 'one flesh', not so that the individuals are extinguished but so that they might be rooted in a single reality of common interests, common happiness, and common suffering. At Easter Jesus accomplishes this kind of unification with humanity by undergoing that definitive

human experience, death, solely out of love for us, and by dying he ties the knot, so to speak, between himself and us.

When we are so bound, we are no longer mere creatures but, through unity with the Son of God, we too are sons and daughters of the divine. Therefore, as children of God, we can name God not only as the Father of Christ but, according to the Lord's Prayer, as 'our' Father. In prayer, we can speak directly to the Father by claiming our unity with Christ as we invoke his name. Then just as Jesus is loved by the Father, we are loved by the Father, and just as Jesus receives the Father's gifts, we too may receive all that the Father has to give: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.' What does Easter have to do with how we pray? In his death and resurrection, Christ has broken down every impediment to love, every obstacle to our union with him and enabled us to share the love that he receives forever from Father. That we may pray to 'our' Father is a sign of the victory of love accomplished in Christ, to whom we have been united and through whose name we may ask for and receive all that the Father wills.

Jon Sanders
Westcott House