

(03 April 2016)

## **John 20: 19-31, From Disciples to Apostles**

Father, you have called us; help us to hear your word to us and to obey, for your name's sake. Amen.

With these verses, we often focus on Thomas and his doubts, and we take comfort from the fact that someone other than us has had doubts and Jesus dealt with him gently and set him right. But today we're going to look instead at those all-important first words of Jesus when he meets with his disciples after his resurrection.

First of all he says "Peace be with you." And again, it is all too easy just to stay with those words of comfort and reassurance. Having shown them his wounds, Jesus says again "Peace be with you." We can imagine the scene: the initial shock, the fear, then the wonderment as they realise who it is standing before them. The excitement, the awe, and then the sense of calm. Before Jesus' next words to them:

"As the Father sent me, so I send you."

"As the Father sent me, so I send you."  
Oh my goodness! What does that mean?

Were the disciples expecting everything to go back to normal once Jesus had 'come back' to them? Were they hoping just to carry on as before, learning from Jesus, watching him, following him wherever he went, being amazed at his miracles, amazed and stirred and inspired by his teaching about God and the Kingdom? Maybe that's what they thought. Business as usual.

But no, Jesus says something very different. "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

The word *disciple* means 'learner': it was common for rabbis in Jesus' time to have a group of followers whose sole purpose was to learn from their master, their teacher. All through the gospels, Jesus' little group of followers are referred to as disciples, ones who are learning.

Now the word *apostle* is from the Greek and means 'one who is sent'. In our Bibles, the New Testament starts with the four Gospels which tell us all about Jesus and his disciples. The Gospels are immediately followed by the book of Acts, but it is *not* the Acts of the *Disciples*, but rather the Acts of the *Apostles*. So there has taken place an amazing transformation in these same followers. Life has changed totally for them! Quite suddenly they have gone from being the ones who tag along behind Jesus, to being the ones given the responsibility of taking his message of love and hope out to the whole world! And without Jesus being with them!

Or was he with them? What did Jesus do, immediately after telling them that he was sending them out? He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit." You could say that here, in just two verses, we have the whole doctrine of the Trinity, spelt out for us: Jesus the Son says: "as the Father sent me, so I send you" and then he gives them the Holy Spirit to enable and empower them for this new work.

I once read or heard someone say that "The Holy Spirit is deeply centrifugal": illustration of fairground ride where you climb up steps, go through a little door and then stand inside a tall wooden cylinder, with your back tight against the wall, the side of the cylinder, and your feet on the wooden floor. When everyone's inside, the cylinder starts to spin, round and round, faster and faster, and you can feel yourself being pushed back hard against the side. That, I understand, is the centrifugal force.

Then the floor beneath your feet starts to go down and down, so you are left suspended high up the side of this cylinder, with nothing beneath you! Round and round you go, and then it gradually slows down, the force of gravity takes over, and you gently slide down the side until your feet finally touch the floor, which is now at ground level. (I only did this once, as a fairly young and naive teenager; I'd no idea what was going to happen, but all the others in the group went in so I did too. Unfortunately I was wearing a skirt, and as the ride slowed down, and I slid down the side, you can imagine what was happening to my skirt! As I was sliding down lower, I was frantically trying to pull my skirt down, because, of course, it was rising higher and higher!

Such is the power of the centrifugal force: it holds you against the side, and is stronger than your weight and gravity that want to pull you down. That is the kind of power poured out on us in the Holy Spirit. If we allow it to, if we get on board that ride, so to speak, the Holy Spirit will send us out in ways we cannot imagine.

But some might ask: Weren't there only the 12 disciples who became apostles? How do you know that this is meant to be for us too? Well, if Jesus had only meant that those 12 were to be sent out, how would the Church ever have grown, or even lived beyond the lifespan of those first 12? The fact is, that we too are called by Jesus; we are called to become disciples, we are called to learn and go on learning from Jesus all our lives. But we are also sent out in the power of his Spirit, to live and work to his praise and glory, as we say week by week at the end of our Eucharist.

All this means in fact that we too have to come to that point of transition: we are still disciples in the sense that we have to go on learning, but we also have to move on, to grow, to step out in faith: we have to let God make us apostles too, we have to be sent out, just as the Father sent Jesus. That is quite an awesome thought!

What does it mean in a practical sense? What did it mean for those first twelve? For many of them, it meant a huge adventure and massive change. It meant leaving home and, going to far away places. We here today owe a great debt to those who travelled across the sea to this island as missionaries from other places. The word missionary also means simply 'one who is sent', but from the Latin, this time. For other Christians, being sent out didn't mean travelling to foreign parts; it meant having their eyes opened so that they could see, really see the people around them, the people in their neighbourhood, their society, the people that God wanted to reach through them. Remember Peter and John: just after Pentecost, all they were doing was simply going to the temple to pray, and they saw the crippled man. And suddenly Peter really saw him, saw him for the first time through God's eyes; and he knew that this crippled beggar, whom he may already have passed a number of times and barely noticed, now Peter knew that this man needed to know the power of God in his life.

Or again, there is the example of Philip, who found himself being urged to take a particular road – he'd no idea why – and then heard the Ethiopian reading from scripture, and Philip knew, just knew that he had to go over to him and explain what the scripture meant, in the light of the risen Jesus Christ. Philip was open to God, he was alert and listening; he was expecting God to use him. Are you expecting God to use you today? and tomorrow?

Some of our younger people, if they decide to become true followers of Jesus, may well find themselves being sent off on all sorts of different adventures in the future. Life with God is never going to be boring, I can assure you. And you don't have to be so young: our friend Sally Jackson out in Ghana isn't in the first flush of youth, nor was Hilary in S Africa.

And what about Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and now Pope Francis, travelling far and wide, taking God's message of love and reconciliation with them wherever they go, wherever God sends them.

Amen.

Where might God be sending you? Where does he want you to take his message of hope, of peace, of forgiveness, of new life? To your neighbours? To the drug addicts or alcoholics of Keighley? To people of a different faith? To children without hope? I don't know what the answer will be for you. I can't tell you where God might be sending you. That's for you to pray about. But you can be sure that God is sending you out to someone; that's what you are here for. Not to bash people over the head with your Bible or preach hellfire at them. That's not what Jesus and those first apostles did. We are called to get to know Jesus better, to let him shape our lives and our thinking, to be moved with compassion as he was so often moved, to go to whomsoever he chooses to send us. (Me to Oakworth Social Club of a lunchtime?)

We sometimes sing that song: "For I'm building a people of power." That's us. Do you feel as though you belong to a people of power? Or do you feel as though we've all got a bit stuck where we are?

We now have forty days or so before we celebrate Pentecost, the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. We are full of the joy of Easter, rejoicing in the hope, the liberation brought to us by the risen Lord Jesus. In these next few weeks, may we now look forward to what comes next, to what God has in store for us, as he equips us with his Spirit and sends us out to do his work. Let's pray: Father, we thank you that you have come to us and met us in the risen Lord Jesus. We thank you that you have promised your Holy Spirit to equip us to do your work, wherever we are. We pray that you will show us, each one of us, where you want to send us, who you want to send us to, with your love and your mercy.