

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020 – Easter 6**  
**Acts 17: 22 – 32; 1 Peter 3: 13 – 22; John 14: 15 – 21**

Change is all around us, it's happening all the time. At the moment we're very conscious of the way in which our lives have changed but generally we don't notice it happening. We're so used to the seasons for example that they almost merge from one to the other without us noticing until suddenly the trees are all in leaf and flowers appear in our gardens. Our language changes over time as well, new words and phrases appear, old



words take on new meaning – when I was a child a mouse was a small furry animal with a long tail which children seemed to like and adults didn't, now however, it's also the means by which I can move around my computer screen.



Have a look at these four versions of the first three verses of Psalm 23, they are all in English. Probably the one most of us are familiar with would be the King James version, it's just about recognisable in Middle English but the English of King Alfred looks incomprehensible.

**Psalm 23 v 1 – 3**

<p><b>New Living Translation (1996)</b>  <sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need.  <sup>2</sup>He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.  <sup>3</sup>He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.</p>	<p><b>King James (1611)</b>            THE LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.            2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.            3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.</p>
<p><b>Middle English (1100 – 1500) (West Midlands Psalter c1350)</b>            1. Our Lord gouerneþ me, and nopyng shal defailen to me; in þe stede of pasture he sett me þer.            2. He norissed me vp water of fylling; he turned my soule fram þe fende.            3. He lad me vp þe bisti<sup>z</sup>es of ri<sup>z</sup>tfulnes for his name.</p>	<p><b>Old English (800 – 1066)</b>  <b>King Alfred's Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms.</b>            1. Drihtnes ys eorðe and eall þæt heo mid gefyld is; and eall mancynn þe þæron eardað is Drihtnes.            2. He gesette þa eorþan ofer þære sæ, and ofer ðam eam he hi gestaðelode.            3. Hwa is þæs wyrðe þæt [he] astige on Godes munt, oþþe hwa mot standan on his halgan stowe?</p>

The point is that nothing stays the same and it's up to us how we deal with the changes.

I would say that the birth of Jesus heralded the biggest change that the world has ever known, yet at the time it went almost unnoticed except by a few shepherds, some very wise men and the whole host of heaven. In today's gospel, Jesus warns of another change, "Soon the world will no longer see me..." he says (John 14 v 19a). He then goes on to promise that they will not be left alone because the Holy Spirit will come. These few verses are one of the rare places in the Bible that the three persons of the Trinity are explicitly brought together. Jesus tells them that Spirit won't be recognised by the world but they already know him

But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. (John 14 v 17)

Jesus has already told them that in him they see the Father and now he's telling them that he is the Holy Spirit too. We think of Jesus as 'the Son' but he is God and God is Three-in-One so in Jesus we see the entire Trinity – it's a bit mind-boggling isn't it?!

During my Reader training I was introduced to the term *Missio Dei*, - 'the mission of God' or 'the sending of God'. Mission is God's business, we need to align ourselves with God's mission, not try to work it all out for ourselves. As Christians our mission is not to fill the churches – put 'bums on seats' as someone once put it – but to point people towards God and allow him to draw them into his kingdom.

Paul gives us one example of that in the speech he gives in today's reading from Acts. He prepares by learning about the culture of the place he was in, then he begins by building the Athenians up, praising them for their spirituality – good teaching technique, moving from the known to the unknown, in this case the Unknown God who he proceeds to make known to them. He gets a mixed reception

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." (Acts 17 v 32)

but the last verse of the chapter tells us that 'some joined him and became believers.' (Acts 17 v 34). Paul uses the culture of the time and place to point people to the true God and allows God to do his work of drawing them into the kingdom.



Altar to the Unknown God

At some point things will change again and we will be allowed to re-open our church buildings, as someone on Facebook put it, "It will be strange not going to church in my pyjamas!". Our faith is a communal one and doesn't sit easily within 'social distancing' – that's used inaccurately because it describes *physical* distancing rather than social distancing which would require us to withdraw from all forms of social contact, no Zoom Coffee, no phone calls, not even Skype calls with our families.

We talk about getting back to normal but the reality is that it will be different when we eventually meet in church again. We will not be able to sing together – I will find that very hard, music is a big part of my life and my worship – we won't be able to shake hands, we may have to wear face-coverings to protect each other, we will have to sit apart from each other BUT we will be able to meet in person, share communion, encourage each other, pray together, praise God together, declare our faith together, hear God's word spoken and taught, together.

It's God who in this time of extreme change is our point of stability, our unchanging Rock. The Holy Spirit is our guide who leads us through the changes if we allow it, who will show us *Missio Dei* and how we can play our part in it, who will give us the strength and grace to face the mockery and possibly the persecution that Peter speaks of, who will help us  
if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. <sup>16</sup>But do this in a gentle and respectful way. (1 Peter 3 v 15 – 16)

In two weeks time we will celebrate the fulfilment of Jesus's promise 'I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.' (John 14 v 18). As with Easter we will have to celebrate it very differently than we usually do but that doesn't negate the promise, in fact it makes it more important, we may be apart but we are not alone because each of us has the Holy Spirit within us – and that also provides a link between us.



PS: Here's another version of Psalm 23

**23rd Psalm in Broad Scots © by John Moir** Banchory, Scotland

Wha' is my shepherd weel I ken  
The Lord himsel' is he:  
He leads me whaur the girse is green  
An' burnies quiet that be.

Aft times I fain astray wad gang  
An wann'r far awa':  
He fin's me oot, he pits me richt  
An' brings me hame an' a'.  
Tho I pass through the gruesome cleuch  
Fin' I ken He is near:  
His muckle crook will me defen'  
Sae I ha'e nocht to fear.  
Ilk comfort whilk a sheep could need  
His thoghtfu' care provides:  
Tho' wolves an' dogs may prowl aboot  
In safety me He hides.  
His guidness an' his mercy baith  
Nae doot will bide wi' He -  
While fallded on the fields o' time  
Or o' eternity.

<http://www.poetryofscotland.co.uk/Other/23rdpsalm.php>