



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Sunday after Ascension Day 2020 8.30 am

1 Peter 4.7-11

John 15.26 - 16.4 (Sermon)

In the name of the risen and ascended Lord. Amen.

Over recent weeks relationships – of all kinds – have been under enormous strain in many homes and communities.

Whilst many people *have* been able to manage well in lockdown, others have been really struggling.

Some people, including family members, who just about managed to hold relationships together before lockdown (because they didn't actually have to spend much time in each other's company) have witnessed enormous, maybe unbridgeable fault lines open up during the days of this pandemic.

Others, separated by huge distances – or even by just a few streets, have struggled to cope with the pain and pressures of separation – we will all know how difficult it has been to maintain good, healthy, strong relationships as shut-in days have turned into weeks and now into months. Waving at a loved one through a window, holding a socially distanced chat, dialling in to a Zoom meeting, whilst they might help, really

do not sustain healthy relationships. There can be no substitute for a kiss, a handshake, a hug – a face-to-face *in person* flesh-and-blood smile.

Jesus came to restore right relationship; build community; to establish a community of people living flourishing lives as subjects of his Father's Kingdom. Subjects, eager to draw others into the Kingdom so that they might flourish too.

Jesus came to build flourishing right relationship between neighbour and neighbour, neighbour and stranger; flourishing right relationship with God –the source and sustainer of all relationship.

The incarnation of Jesus, the eternal Word, was part of God the Father's eternal plan to restore 'right' relationship, to restore 'true community' fractured but not irrevocably so – at the Fall, through creation's errant waywardness and mankind's misuse of freewill.

In the groping theology of Genesis, the first thing fallen humanity does, is to hide, to self-isolate: hide its physical body behind fig leaves, and to hide itself in the Garden from its creator; to break relationship, destroy community on both the horizontal and vertical planes.

The whole of the narrative of the Old Testament can be read as an on-going narrative of a human-divine game of Cat and Mouse: God the Father constantly searching for humanity and humanity running away and hiding from God's eager, longing, loving gaze. God trying to build and restore community and

relationships and mankind doing its damndest to dash it to pieces.

At the Ascension, the risen Christ, freed from the boundaries of time and place, lifts fallen, broken, fractured humanity, through his humanity, into the eternal heart of divine love, and the flourishing, healthy relationship between God and creation, severed by the Fall, is repaired and restored; the breach is mended, and God's invitation to become part of his flourishing Kingdom is offered afresh to all who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Next Sunday, we celebrate the great Feast of Pentecost, the feast which brings the 50 days of Easter to a close. We shall recall the Holy Spirit being lavishly and wondrously poured out on the infant Church: relationships healed, community recreated and made whole, and, as St Paul writes to the Romans, mankind, once again, able to give restored creation a voice by "cry[ing] out, 'Abba, Father'"ⁱ.

Right relationship with one another - restored; right relationship with God - re-established; a new community - birthed *in* and *through* and *by* the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross; a restored, re-established community - sealed for eternity through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The entire work of salvation, as we understand it, is one of "re-generation", regeneration, in which the fatherhood of God, through the gift of the Son and the Holy Spirit, frees us from the sad and hopeless condition of being (through our own

wayward wilfulness) self-isolating, community-shunning orphans – the sad state into which we had fallen through sin.

But alleluia!, we are no longer stateless, community-shunning, orphans, but beloved sons and daughters!; no longer self-isolating individuals under unbearable strain, but living, serving, praying, worshipping members of a community filled with hope!; brothers and sisters of Christ filled by the Holy Spirit!; co-heirs with Jesus of God's eternal promises!; no longer strangers but pilgrims!; no longer estranged by our own wilfulness, but embraced by God's all-forgiving, limitless love!; members together of the Body of Christ, the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (however tightly closed her doors might be at this time)!.

So, in the joy of Easter and in the glory of the Ascension, we pray for the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Defender and Comforter, the Spirit of truth, freedom and peace, to come, to fall upon us and renew us and strengthen us; to reassure us and to draw us ever-deeper into flourishing right relationship; to draw us ever-more closely into the limitless depths of the eternal heart of divine life and love - the perfect community we name Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people. Alleluia!

ⁱ Romans 8:14-15