HOMILY FOR EASTER 6 YEAR C

1 MAY 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

The opening words of today’s gospel ‘If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him’ are very remarkable words indeed, possibly the very most remarkable in all the Gospels. They are particularly so when taken together with the words which come just a little later in today’s passage speaking of the ‘Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name’.

These words speak of the dwelling with us and in us individually of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, of God. They seem very remarkable words for two rather obvious reasons, because they suggest firstly that the wholly other transcendent Creator of the entire vast universe can yet choose to ‘fit himself in’, as it were, to the small and fragile frames of our life and that secondly we in this small fragility of ours, our temporary and passing reality, nonetheless somehow have room in us for God, for the divine Persons: ‘we shall come to you and make our home with you’. And the way for this is not by some alteration or adjustment of our nature, but by ‘loving him and keeping his word’. And we are all here doing this very thing, this very morning. It is no long, complicated, exacting, abstruse alchemy, a life time of rarely achieved mystical asceticism, it is just ‘we shall come to him and make our home with him’. It is something for all of us.

This quite extraordinary vision is based on the conviction that we are capable of God, that we are, as it says in the book of Genesis, made in the image and likeness of God and that therefore, somehow, remarkably, there is room in us for God and that God chooses to come even to us.

In both the seasons of Lent and of Eastertide, the gospel readings are largely taken from St John, the evangelist who is pictured as an eagle, who soars high yet whose sharp eye takes in the very precise detail and contour of our earthly life. The root of the Greek word ‘men’ which is translated in our passage this morning as ‘we shall make our home with him’ occurs repeatedly throughout the gospel of John, though reading an English translation nearly always obscures the power of this repetition, as the word is very variously translated even within one version, for example as ‘staying’, ‘living’, ‘dwelling’, ‘abiding’, ‘remaining’, ‘being at home’, all depending on the context.

Essentially it is the same root word used in the first chapter of John, when the first disciples ask Jesus ‘where are you staying’ and he answers ‘Come and see’, when in chapter 5 Jesus’ word is described as remaining or abiding in the faithful disciple, at the end of chapter 6, the long discourse on the Bread of Life, when Jesus says ‘whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, lives in me and I live in that person’. There are three uses of the word in chapter 14, which includes the use in today’s Gospel passage and a climactic eleven uses in the first eleven verses of John chapter 15 the ‘true vine’ discourse: ‘Remain in me, as I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me.’ And then right at the end of the gospel, very enigmatically, deliberately so it seems, it is the word used of the beloved disciple, when the risen Jesus says to Peter ‘if he is to remain until I come, what is that to you?’

Let us rewind to this first use. The disciples in chapter 1, Andrew and another unnamed, ask ‘Where are you staying’ and Jesus says ‘Come and see’. But then in his prologue for the reader the evangelist has already established where Jesus stays, where he belongs; ‘No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’. So Jesus is the one who by being close to the Father’s heart, makes him known to us and brings us to him ‘Come and see’: come and see that I am in the Father.

Now we go to the last chapters of the gospel and back to this enigmatic person: the beloved disciple, the disciple Jesus loves. Yes, St John the evangelist himself, of course, but not a person in a closed role, a person who invites us, the readers of, the believers in, the Gospel, into himself, who are also the disciples that Jesus loves, called to be not just spectators, but participants. At the Last Supper, with talk of betrayal and denial, heavy in the air, he is the one who reclines at table, close to Jesus, and the phrase is exactly the same as in the Prologue so the disciple is in the heart of Jesus as Jesus is in the heart of God the Father. We who are the beloved disciples of the Lord can remain in him, until he comes to us. He comes to us as the one who is already in us.

This notion of divine indwelling, of us being in Christ the divine Son and of the divine Son being one with God the Father is the heartbeat of the last chapters of St John’s Gospel before his Passion narrative, the ‘Farewell discourses’ and they reach their conclusion in the final chapter 17, which is set as an alternative Gospel for today, the high priestly prayer, where we hear the divine Son speaking in the heart of his Father and the final words of this prayer are: ‘so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them’.

‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home with him’, dwell with, stay, remain, abide. And how? Love him and keep his word. This is the way. And I think Jesus and St John want us above all and remarkably to see this as possible for us, to love him and to keep his word. Again from today’s Gospel passage: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid’. And why not? Because there is room in us, disciples the Lord loves, for God.