

Easter 5. Havant

Gospel: John 14.1-14

I have always been fascinated by that little exchange between Jesus and Philip.

It happens as Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure and the life they will have to live when he is gone - in the immediate future this means after his death, but looking forward also to his ascension. That's one of the reasons why we have that particular gospel this morning as we begin to look forward to Ascension Day next week.

It is a pity really that the reading didn't start a few verses earlier at the end of chapter 13 when Jesus had said "*Where I am going you cannot come*", and Peter had asked "*Lord, where are you going?*" And then of course quite early on in today's reading we heard from Thomas the rather sensible comment "*Lord, we do not know we are going, so how can we know the way?*" The whole of chapter 14 is meant to strengthen the faith of the disciples and reassure them that Jesus will still be with them, albeit in a different way, and that they will also have the Holy Spirit to guide them. But that is to get ahead of ourselves and you will have to wait till next week for the next bit! Enough just to notice for the moment that in preparing his disciples, Jesus is also teaching us.

It is an age long human desire to want to see God and know the mysteries of eternity. But from the time of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the forbidden tree we have been warned that not everything is open to us now. Moses implored God to show him his glory, (*Exodus 33. 18-20*) But God had replied "*I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name The Lord. And "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.*" In other words, Moses must be content with what God chooses to reveal of himself and will have to get on with life as God has commanded him without knowing all the answers.

Questioning humanity wants to have all the answers of course and keeps on asking the same question. "*Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied.*" We can't expect to get a different answer from what Moses got from God and Philip from Jesus. There is a limit set to what we can know at the moment, but that does not mean we can know nothing.

At the beginning of St John's gospel we read "*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.*" (*John 1.18*) This is the answer Philip gets: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*" Because Jesus is "*the image of the invisible God*" (*Col 1.15*) and "*in him all the fullness of God lives bodily*" (*Col 2.9*) all that on earth we can see of God, we see in Jesus, and in seeing Jesus we see we can see of God all earth.

That's all pretty heady stuff and in it the two great theological writers of the New Testament, John and Paul, pretty well summed up in advance all that the creeds and

teachers of the later church agonised so long over. But, important and true though it all is, it doesn't in itself take us very much further forward: after all doctrine never saved anybody! Philip's question hadn't been a matter of intellectual curiosity.

I think the real key to this morning's gospel lies in something much more down to earth. It's all about the little word "you", or to be more exact it's about the two little words "you" and the old English word "thou". English no longer has a different way of addressing one person and many. But it wasn't always like that; once upon a time, English made this distinction like many other languages still do. The Authorised Version captures the original better than any modern translation.

Throughout this episode Jesus had been speaking to the disciples as "you" - in the plural, all of them together. But just twice he speaks in the singular, addressing one disciple in particular. One was Peter at the end of chapter 13. You will remember that Jesus had said to the disciples: "*Whither I go, ye cannot come*" "*Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, **thou** canst not follow me now; but **thou** shalt follow me afterwards. Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, wilt **thou** lay down my life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, the cock shall not crow, till **thou** hast denied me thrice.*"

The second time Jesus switches from the plural to the singular is in this morning's conversation with Philip; the contrast is even more striking here because it happens in the middle of a sentence: "*Jesus saith unto him, have I been so long time with **you**, and yet hast **thou** not known me, Philip?*"

What is happening is not just that Jesus addresses an individual rather than the disciples as a whole: it is rather that he shifts the whole subject matter from the theological question of his own identity - what theologians rather grandly call "Christology" - to the personal question of individual discipleship. There is no hiding place for Peter and Philip; they cannot avoid the directness of what Jesus says. Nor can we.

That is ultimately why I find this passage so fascinating - and so challenging. The precise forms of the challenge to Peter and Philip were different: and the precise form of Jesus' invitation to each one of us will be different. But each of us has to answer personally and directly the question that on another occasion Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do you say that I am?*" and accept the implications of our answer for the way we live our lives. By that and that alone we can come to know the one whom St Paul describes as "*the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To whom be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.*"

