

James Collins Sermon - Sunday 21 June 2020
Famous Last Words [2] Father, Son & Spirit (John 14:15-26)

Well, hello everyone - I trust that you are keeping well and that perhaps you are enjoying some of the freedoms that are becoming available to us as the lockdown begins to lift. Of course, football is back so things are looking much, much better! More seriously, I'm really looking forward to preaching in real time to real people but for the moment this will have to do.

We're continuing the series which Mark started last week looking at the so-called 'Farewell discourse' in John's Gospel. John devotes nearly a quarter of his Gospel to the ministry of Jesus to his disciples on the night before he was arrested. Jesus' 'famous last words' cover a great deal of ground but today we're looking at a passage which brings out the way in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all involved in bringing us to salvation, incorporating us into the life of God, and giving us an eternal purpose and future, destiny and hope.

Now this passage, like so many in John's writings, is deeply spiritual, poetic and inspiring. But it isn't easily explained. In fact, there are many themes woven together here and to go through them one by one would easily take a couple of hours. Let's see what we can learn together in 15 minutes or so.

Firstly, we get a glimpse into the reality that underpins the universe. We get a fleeting look at the nature of God and the nature of his activity. The passage invites prayerful meditation more than analysis and as I've reflected on it, an image keeps coming to mind. I keep picturing God as three people, hand in hand, in a circle spinning together as though they were dancing energetically and with great joy - huge beaming smiles and much laughter. The three are, as all Christians know, the three persons of the Trinity; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. All three feature in this passage. Then, imagine that the whole of creation exists in the middle of that circle of those three divine persons, and that the love and joy of the three dancers is focused on the creation and that they are particularly focused on the people who live in that creation. Sadly, most of the people are living with their gaze fixed joylessly on the ground - they have no awareness of the joy and love and energy that is spinning and whirling all around them but sometimes one of the divine dancers steps in to take hold of one of us and we look up and see that the reality underlying the whole of our lives and the whole of nature is this joyful, loving community of divine persons. And, captivated by that reality, we erupt in joy and wonder and we join in, learning a few dance moves of our own.

Now, I want to be very clear that this is a metaphorical dance! I have no intention of literally dancing in this world or even in the new creation, but, nevertheless, dancing is actually a very good picture of the life of God and his people.

Let me draw out a few lessons that are rooted in this passage using this picture of a divine dance.

Firstly, no one can join this dance unless God takes the initiative. Look at v17, Jesus' words - 'The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him'. Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit. Left to our own devices we are ignorant of God and blind to his reality and activity. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is constantly stepping towards us and calling us to open our eyes to this tremendous reality that is going on all around us. Theologians call this activity of the Holy Spirit 'revelation' - the unveiling of our darkened understanding. Not only that, he is not content for us remain spectators - he constantly reaches out to us and calls us to step into the love of God, the love that the Father and the Son have for each other and the love they both share with the Holy Spirit. They want us to be included in the divine family which is the foundational reality of the universe. Jesus speaks of this in v20, '... I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you'. The disciple of Jesus is incorporated into the life and the love of God himself.

Now, to be included in the life of God is to be baptised into that love; is to be plunged into love. Throughout this 'farewell discourse' Jesus constantly refers to the theme of love. The love springs from the Father to Jesus and from Jesus to the disciples and from disciple to disciple. The life of the Christian is love from start to finish. Jesus himself said the greatest commandment is to love God with one's whole personality and the second most important commandment follows on - we must love each other - more on that next week as we look at Jesus' new commandment that he gives his people in this farewell discourse.

It's worth pausing at this point to pose a question. If, as is undoubtedly true according to the scriptures, the Christian life is 'love from start to finish' then why do so many Christians seem so cold and hard? Do you know a loveless Christian? Are you a loveless Christian? Am I a loveless Christian? These are very good questions indeed, and if we're prepared to let them examine us as individuals and as a community, they can become very painful ones as we recognise our shortcomings. I'm not going to give you a simple answer as

to why so many Christians appear so loveless, when the Christian life is love from start to finish, except to say that this should not be so. And if we recognise it in our own life, if we recognise it in the life of those around us, if we recognise it in our church family, then we need to get on our knees before God in prayer, because a loveless Christian, a loveless church, is a contradiction in terms.

Now Jesus goes on to make another very important point about love. In this short passage he makes the same point three times - if you love him, you will obey his teaching. Three times he says that those who love him will be obedient to him. It's no good coming to an awareness of this awesome spectacle at the heart of the universe - the divine dance of joy and creativity and grace - and then to decide you can improve on it by devising your own steps or even by trying to big-up your own part in the dance. The moves are already laid out and the joy is found in being swept along. If you want to dance with Jesus, you have to let him lead and you can definitely improve and enjoy the dance more, as you study the moves he has laid out, move smoothly with the flow of the dance and perhaps join the Holy Spirit in encouraging others to join in. The Christian must be a serious student of Jesus, examining his every move in order to move in accord with him. Does that describe you and me? Are we going with the flow of Jesus? Or is our Christianity, is our Christian community as a church, sloppy and uncoordinated because we're unwilling to put the effort into studying the scriptures, we're unwilling to bring our lives into obedience with him. We don't seek revelation from the Holy Spirit. We don't live out what he's trying to teach us. Will you, will I, submit to Jesus' dance moves or will we insist on having the community of God skip to our tune - you'll never find joy in the dance that way. Furthermore, although the dance is full of life and joy, it is also hard work, requiring discipline and commitment and sometimes the training can be painful and you'll be tempted to give up and slink away - but once you truly join in the dance of God there's nothing else like it! It's well worth all the demands it will place upon you.

Elsewhere in John's Gospel, Jesus promises 'life in all its fullness' to his followers. You see, there really are only two alternatives. You can join in the life of God - the eternal dance of joy and love and peace - or you can slink away into dark corners and invent moves of your own or give up altogether. Initially the freedom of independence might seem exciting but it always ends badly. Because there really is only one life worth living and that is the life of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In these few verses, Jesus assures his disciples that the life of God, the divine dance, will go on even after he has died, as he's about to, of course he's going to rise again, he's going to send the Spirit. He assures them that although they will be drawn into the life of God by a different dance partner (that same Holy Spirit) the dance is the same. If the Spirit reveals Jesus to you, you'd be a fool not to take his hand and experience life in all its fullness.

In closing, forgive me if this extended metaphor isn't really your kind of thing. To be honest, it's not really my kind of thing either, but I couldn't quite shake this picture that came to me as I started preparing, of the Trinity, dancing, spinning and whirling around their creation, and calling us to join in that dance. Now like me, you may hate dancing, but even I can't help noticing that good dancers seem to have a fantastic time. In the end though, God is inviting you into something of which dancing is only the palest of imitations. He is inviting you to share in the divine love which is the bedrock of reality. Will you allow the Holy Spirit to lead you to the Lord Jesus? Will you take his hand and humbly start to live out the life of God alongside brothers and sisters, from every background in the community of God? You can do that right now as we come together to celebrate the love of God in Christ through Holy Communion - over to you Marilyn.