

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Father Peter Groves

John 14.15-21

Tallis “If ye love me”

Those we call theologians are not nearly as good at communicating the profound beauty of the Christian gospel as are those whom we call artists and poets and musicians. In a society where fewer and fewer young people encounter the faith in any significant way, the centrality of a Christian vision for so many in the past, and especially for those whose creative genius lives on in their work, helps to remind us that people frequently experience the presence of the Holy Spirit without having any idea that they are doing so.

The introit we heard this morning, Thomas Tallis’s “If ye love me”, falls into that delicate category of pieces which don’t look too difficult on the page. The individual lines are relatively easy to sing,

and this has the unfortunate effect of convincing people that anyone can perform it. This is not a problem for us in this church, of course, indeed so used have we become to the extremely high musical standards our singers maintain that I doubt many of us realise how very few parish churches enjoy anything remotely similar. The only down side to this privilege is that when we're elsewhere, we doubtless notice the difference. One of my former churches had this piece as one of its staples, and I can still remember the awful dread of approaching the very high, and very highly exposed, tenor entry towards the end, where our beautiful place of worship was filled what sounded like a duck being strangled.

The simplicity of the lines is part of a wider complexity which draws out Jesus' words. Jesus is talking to his disciples on the night before his death. The gospel gives us a scene of closeness, of intimacy, in which those whom Jesus has loved to the end are given, from his own mouth, the new

law, the new commandment. But that intimacy depends upon another and greater intimacy, the relationship between Jesus and the Father. If you love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you for ever, e'en the Spirit of truth.

First, we have the basic rhythm of the introductory words: If ye love me, keep my commandments, stressing at length the word love, and then the centre of the word "commandments". These are the two words which the evangelist wants us to connect – if you love me, keep my commandments. Then we turn from unity to multiplicity, and the staggered polyphonic entries play out the next idea: I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter. The gospel language has moved quickly from the simple relationship between Jesus and his disciples, to the ultimate relationship between the Father and the Son, the

relationship played out in the gift of the comforter, the paraclete, the one we call the Holy Spirit.

The prayer of Jesus to the Father, the self-giving love which flows between them, is reflected in the interplay between the voices, until, on a simple downward scale, we come to the expression of the gift in which that prayer results: and he will give you another comforter. Jesus is going away, but this is not a cause of sadness, because his love for his disciples is expressed in the new commandment he has given – love one another as I have loved you. This life of love to which he calls them will be made possible because of the gift of the spirit which the Father will send, the advocate or comforter who will be sent because Jesus is going to the Father.

But there is more to say and more to hear. First of all, the abiding presence of this gift is set out in a phrase which sounds as if it might be bringing us to its end, and is then cleverly interrupted on the

words “for ever”, as if telling us that the eternity promised by Jesus is not the eternity of stagnation, of remaining the same. The one who will abide for ever has yet to be identified, but when we learn of his identity we realise that this gift is all about moving forward, of being led, of action and motion, and nothing at all about standing still.

Immediately after this interrupted “for ever” we are told who this comforter is: the Spirit of truth. This bold identification – e’en the Spirit of truth – is made with the strong high note emphasising the word even, expressed here as a monosyllable, almost as a musical exclamation mark inviting us to sit up and take notice of what is going on, who precisely is this comforter that we are promised: he is none other than the Spirit of truth, the third person of the Trinity, the life of God’s love breathed into all creation.

Two chapters later, when Jesus is speaking again of this comforter or paraclete, we are told that he

is “the Spirit of truth who will lead you into all truth”. As if anticipating that later text, Tallis moves on from who the Spirit is and proceeds to show us what he does, using his polyphony to communicate the active life which the spirit gives. We are being led by the Spirit into all truth, and so the varied vocal entries almost walk their way through the musical scale to lead us to the climax which is the truth of God himself. In the 16th century, the connection between the word Spirit and the word sprite was more readily recognisable because of the frequency with which Spirit was pronounced as a monosyllable – Spirit. Pronounced this way, the short vowel surrounded by the consonants – Spirit, ending sharply with the t – gives a little burst of energy that contrasts markedly with the settled fulfilment of the music in the long vowel and the gentle sound of truth.

This idea of being led by the Spirit is more than a verbal or musical image of following Christ, it is in fact a reflection of the Trinitarian life which is

God's gift to us in baptism. To live in the Spirit is to enter into the life of God, to seek in prayer and worship to be drawn into the perfect self-giving of Father, Son and Spirit, and hence to live out that gift of love which is poured into our hearts by the Spirit which leads us into all truth. The act of prayer is God's act, calling us into this life and inviting us to abide with him as he abides in us for ever. Jesus says, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. This is the eternal truth of God, that which is always the case whether we know it or not. Entering into this truth is what we mean by prayer, and few prayers are more heavenly than those set to music.

So let us pray: