

Sermon 09/05/2026 Jesus and his friends

A conversation with a daughter in law who has a circle, metaphorically if not literally, around the date when A levels and GCSE exams are finished reminded me that my friends were always surprised that my last minute maths revision took the form of rereading Winnie the Pooh. Which in turn reminded me of the final chapter of The House at Pooh Corner. (Slight diversion here to explain for anyone not familiar that the stories are about a young boy and his soft toy friends) It begins 'Christopher Robin was going away. Nobody knew why he was going; nobody knew where he was going

The night before Jesus died he had supper with his friends. We are reminded of this at every communion service. He had supper with his friends. It was Passover but we don't hear of a grand celebratory feast, or some fancy dinner. The only things we can be sure they had on the table are bread and wine. It was supper in a borrowed upstairs room. And although by now the disciples had grasped that he was going, they were still a bit hazy about where to and why.

And before he left Jesus spoke to his friends. It's not clear in John's gospel whether he spoke before, during or after eating. Suffice to say John has recorded him as saying a lot. It forms the content of four and a bit chapters of the gospel. It was no fancy speech but the words of someone who knew that leaving his friends would be difficult for him and for them. So his words take the form of a goodbye hug.

He understands that for the past three years the disciples have looked to him to guide them. Even when they went out in pairs to teach and heal he was still around, they had the security of his guidance. With their knowledge of his leaving comes their fear of what a disaster it may prove to be for them. How will they carry on? And he promises the thing that they need the most. He has been their comforter, teaching by word and by example how the world can become a better place, and on those occasions when they have witnessed miracles they have had a glimpse of his real power. How can this be replicated to give them the confidence to carry on?

'You will have a new comforter', he says, 'Asked for by me but sent from God himself. With his help everything will be alright. Don't worry'. We are introduced to the Holy Spirit.

Not that this comfort is available to everyone, only to those who live the life that Jesus expects of them, who obey his commandments. In this way of showing their love for Jesus the disciples will be loved by the father and cared for by the Holy Spirit. It is part of our inheritance from the generations of Christians there have been between those first disciples and ourselves.

This is in contrast to the speech from Paul that we heard in the reading from Acts., very much a speech made in the place where the Athenian Council met. A speech made to

the assembled crowd but still focused on the God who gives us everything. The God who cares for us.

Jesus hugged the disciples in the way that he continues to hug us. It is possible at times to feel that invisible arm around our shoulders letting us know that everything will be alright. 'Do not be anxious', 'Do not be afraid'. We are not left as orphans without someone to look after us.

The promise that Jesus made the night before he died to his small group of friends is every bit as much a promise to us as it was to them. If we demonstrate that we are his children, if we keep his commandments he will make sure that the Holy Spirit is there for us. Just as we can show our allegiance in our dealings with others, our concern, our actions, so too can the Holy Spirit show its presence in the actions of others, the gentleness of a nurse, the change lent for a car park machine, as well as the courage that the spirit gives.

St Paul spoke out in the centre of Athens. In London there is a long tradition of public oratory at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park. Paul was frequently in trouble for his speeches. At Hyde Park even though there are no special rules, only the normal standards of British law, people are rarely asked to stop, although they may be subject to vigorous heckling. Wherever and whatever the subject it takes courage to stand in public and express your views and beliefs. Paul was guided by the Holy Spirit. The same spirit that will guide us when we know that we must speak out.

On that last night Jesus had supper with his friends. It was as their friend that he promised them they would never need to feel alone, that there would always be someone with them. We are also promised that, not in the grand way of politicians electioneering but in a direct relationship as if over the kitchen table.

Which takes us back to Winnie the Pooh again. By the final page we understand that Christopher Robin is going away to school, just as we understand when we read John's gospel that Jesus is going to join his father in heaven. The book ends, 'wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in the enchanted place on the top of the forest a little boy and his bear will always be playing'. Wherever we go and whatever happens to us on the way the Holy Spirit will be with us. It is a promise made directly to the first disciples and part of our Christian inheritance.