There is always hope – Easter 6 year A

St John 14:14-21

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;  
Take our minds and think through them;  
Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You, Lord Jesus. Amen.

2020 is already a year like no other any of us have lived through. At the start, there were few people even thinking about a global pandemic, but now I guess there are not many who are not. This virus has changed so much already and will change more things. Would any of us thought that we would be using and becoming pretty good at using Zoom, WhatsApp or any of the various apps and software on our computers, iPads and smartphones. Yes, all this has already altered our lives and opened us up to new ideas, while at the same time forcing us to move from old comfortable ways into uncharted waters.

Well who has thought about how the Disciples felt at this moment after Easter just before Ascension Day? I think that if we ponder about all that happened since that supper in the upper room which was just thirty-eight days ago, it would have seemed to them utterly unreal, unexpected, and left them floundering. The parallel with how we find things here and now is clear. At the start they had just had that wonderful entry on Palm Sunday into Jerusalem. They would have been on a high, but how quickly that all evaporated. Arrest, trial and crucifixion within 24 hours. Total despair. Then amazing stories and Jesus is back, but it is all not quite the same as before and they are fearful of might happen. Can we imagine a tiny bit of what it was like for them?

We know the story. We can look back with 20/20 hindsight, but the Disciples could not. They were somewhere very different to where they expected to be. A different place, not in physical terms, but in mental terms, in their minds. Thy had spent three years with Jesus, slowly getting to know his ways and so often misunderstanding what he was trying to tell them. He was their friend and purpose in life. Now with all the drama and everything happening over the last weeks and these amazing appearances, what was going to happen next? Where was it all going to end? We can have sympathy with them, because we seem in many ways to be facing the same sort of challenge. We have managed the last few weeks, but now as we are told that restrictions will be relaxed, we are still left with the feeling that this is not over and that some parts of our lives will never be the same. The question is what will the new normal be like, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year?

The passage from St John’s Gospel that we heard read today is from the section about the Last Supper and Judas going off to betray Jesus. Jesus tries to tell the other Disciples what they need to hold on to. His message is to reassure them that as long as they do really love him, that they will receive the Holy Spirit, the help they need to get through the coming hours. Given what is going to happen they are going to need all the help they can get. They will be all alone. We have this passage here just before Ascension Day to help give us hope for the future. At this moment after the resurrection the Disciples are about to have Jesus leave them for a second time. There is however a difference between the days just before the Crucifixion and the days just before the Ascension. In the last weeks the Disciples have actually come to understand much of what Jesus has been telling them about how it all is. They have been changed by this experience and more change is coming, but this time they are better prepared for it all. We who know the story, know just how much more the Disciples will change in the coming days and weeks ahead. They will lose their fear, gain courage and conviction and even be prepared to die in that faith and the belief that their friend Jesus was the Messiah.

So nearly two thousand years later in these weeks after Easter, we are undergoing disruption to our normal lives. Things we have been able to freely do are restricted or taken away. Uncertainty rules. Every expert has something to say, but each one often seems to contradict the previous one. What is in fact the case is that we cannot tell the future and we do not like that. We like to know what will happen tomorrow and we like things being the same way as yesterday. Change unsettles us and we resist it and too much change at once completely throws us. Being shut out of our churches leaves us bereft. But we forget that the church building however beautiful is not actually the Church with a capital C. We can pray and should pray wherever we find ourselves. What we must do is to give thanks for the technology we have available to use and this miracle is how I am speaking to you now. I worked in Information Technology for thirty-two years and am still amazed by what has and is happening here and now. If you have the right things, computers and smartphones become just tools like spanners and screwdrivers. They have now so simple and easy to use that our grandchildren are in fact utterly at home with them. But therein also lies a trap. We can think that we are in control, but we are not. This virus has shown that and in a way we were really unprepared for. However that is exactly when we need to stop and listen to Jesus’ words, which tell us there is always hope and we are not alone. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” This is the real heart of the matter. Amen.