

Sermon preached by Fr Robert Mackley at S. John the Evangelist, Brownswood Park
on the Feast of S. John before the Latin Gate, 2015.

Lections: Exodus 33:7-11, I John 1, John 21:19-end.

‘Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My cousin and her husband came to visit last week with James, their adorable 2 and a half year old son. It was a lovely visit until in his excitement at being in a new house – which those of you with little children will know means lunatic running around at top speed – he ran into the door and banged his head. Many tears ensued and it was only after a long cuddle from mummy, being held close while he sobbed, that calm, quiet and feeling better eventually prevailed. It may, I suspect, also have been helped by the promise of ice cream...

That image of being held close, of feeling the love of someone, not just knowing it in our heads, is an image that is perfect for your wonderful Patronal festival. For as we have just heard, your patron, St John, the beloved disciple, ‘reclined next to Jesus’ at the Last Supper. Actually the precise words from the Last Supper are rather more specific: St John was ‘lying close to the breast of Jesus’. He was resting his head on the Lord’s chest.

Now skip with me to the beginning of St John’s Gospel, all that wonderful stuff about ‘In the beginning was the word’ that we get at Christmas and Midnight Mass. Well if you run to the end of that opening section of John’s Gospel you get this phrase: ‘It is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.’ Yet the Greek original word isn’t quite ‘heart’ – it’s ‘bosom’, or ‘breast’. Jesus, God’s Son, rests, reclines on, is close to the bosom or breast of, the Father. And St John we find out tonight and at the Last Supper rests, reclines on, is close to the bosom or breast of Jesus. John resting on Jesus, Jesus resting on the Father.

Yet of course we’re never given St John’s name in the Gospel are we – we’re usually simply told ‘the Beloved disciple’ or ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’. And there’s a reason for that: it’s that John doesn’t want us to think all this only applies to, is only about, him. It’s not – it’s about all beloved disciples; in other words, it’s about us.

For the Christian faith, before it’s concerned with anything else, is about being where Jesus is, being with Jesus. On another occasion in John’s Gospel Martha, Jesus’s friend, rushes up to Jesus weeping because her brother Lazarus has died. And she doesn’t say to him, if you’d said some healing prayers or if you’d done this or said that; no, she says if you’d been here, my brother would not have died. If you had been here.

Being where Jesus is, being close to him, like James my cousin’s son with her, this is what your patron St John teaches us today about the Christian faith.

And why is that important? Because just like James when he hurt himself, it’s where we need to be. To be held by Jesus. We are constantly banging our heads, in the sins we commit, the wrong turnings we take in life. And like a crying child who is soothed by his mum’s heartbeat

and the warmth of her embrace, so the same heartbeat and embrace of Jesus is what we need and what our suffering world needs so deeply.

For the people of Brownswood Park, therefore, being where Jesus is, is being here at St John's. Here we are the Body of Christ, here we celebrate the Mass and receive Holy Communion, when we are quite literally Beloved Disciples, resting in Jesus at his Supper as we receive him into ourselves, into our hearts in the Sacrament.

Tonight we are also celebrating the gift to you of a new priest, Fr Justin, a gift from God as each priest is to a parish, in order that we can celebrate the Eucharist and so be close to Jesus's heart, close to his breast. Let's pray that Fr Justin's arrival will remind us never to neglect this beautiful sacrament, this greatest of God's gifts to us – the Eucharist – where Jesus's whole life, death and resurrection, all of his sacrificial love are made present for us in those most simple foodstuffs, bread and wine, now made most truly food and most truly drink as the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation. When you come up for Communion tonight try to remember that as you receive Communion Jesus is holding you close to his heart. Hear the heartbeat of the church, feel the warmth of the embrace of the Body of Christ. And if you can't, don't worry – he truly is there, he truly is close to you even if you don't feel close to him.

But not only did Jesus tell his apostles and those ordained by them right down to today to 'do this in remembrance of me', to celebrate Mass; he also told them to do something else to bring people close to him, to give them the same healing that my cousin's son James needed when he was hurt. Jesus told his apostles and the bishops and priests who would come after them, to forgive sins. As St John tells us in his gospel, one of the very first things Jesus did, on the very day of his resurrection, on a Sunday like this, was breathe on the apostles the Holy Spirit and to say to them, 'if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven'. Where Jesus is, is forgiveness. And just as he gives us his priests so that we can be close to him in Holy Communion so he gives us his priests so that we can be close to him in Confession. St John reminds us that healing is not just of body and mind but of spirit too. True healing – of body, mind or spirit – only comes with forgiveness, with reconciliation. And Jesus has breathed his Spirit on us that we might know his forgiveness as closely now as those who first encountered him 2,000 years ago. So praise God for the gift of a new priest for this parish.

But there's one final instruction St John gives us tonight in our Gospel reading: he repeats Jesus's words to St Peter – 'Follow me'. For we're not to stay in this church building, but having been brought close to Jesus in communion and confession, we are given that instruction: follow me. 'Go in the peace of Christ' we are commanded at the end of Mass. And so we do – for having received him here we then go out, not alone, not leaving him here, but with him, we go out resting in his bosom, just as Jesus was sent into the world by his Father and yet never ceased to be close to the Father's heart even when in agony on the Cross.

We, other Johns, other beloved disciples, are to go out and bring that closeness of Jesus to a needy world. In shared meals and acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, among family and friends and with enemies and strangers, we bring Jesus near; in credit unions and foodbanks, in simple acts of kindness and hospitality, we bring Jesus near. So on this your Patronal Festival may St John pray for us that we may always remain close to Jesus's heart and so bring others close to him too. Amen.