

Sermon - John 14: 15-21

A few weeks ago I watched a television programme about the early years of the railways in Britain. The presenter made the point that, although we now look back on those years in the first half of the nineteenth century as a period of enormous progress, not everyone greeted the birth of the railways with open arms. Many were full of fear; afraid that travelling at speeds of twenty or thirty miles per hour would prevent people from breathing, that the “new-fangled” steam locomotives would explode, that the animals in nearby fields would die from fear and that bridges and tunnels would collapse. All this, and more, engendered an almost hysterical fear about the way the world was changing.

The programme focussed particularly on Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the civil engineer in charge of building the Great Western Railway from London to Bristol. One of his greatest achievements was to build a tunnel through Box Hill between Chippenham and Bath. It took five years, four thousand men and a ton of gunpowder and candles each week to cut Box Tunnel through nearly two miles of hard stone. When it first opened people were too scared to travel through it, fearing that they would be crushed by the air pressure below ground. Today, nearly a hundred and eighty years later, the tunnel is still in use! The tunnel runs in a straight line and on a few days at the beginning of April each year the early morning sun shines right through the tunnel, from end to end. Many people see this as a visible sign of Brunel’s confidence that the railways would ultimately bring light, not destruction.

When I heard this I thought of words from the opening of John’s gospel describing the birth of Jesus: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” This theme of Jesus as the light

who has come into the darkness of our world runs through John's Gospel

Today's reading is in chapter fourteen of the same Gospel. It is in the early part of what is often referred to as the "farewell discourse", which begins in chapter thirteen and continues to the end of chapter seventeen. In the first part of his Gospel John follows his accounts of Jesus' actions with a discourse interpreting the signs given. But this time he reverses the order. This time explanation precedes action – the trial, death, resurrection and, implicitly, ascension of Jesus. In this discourse Jesus is preparing his disciples so that they will be able to live out his message once he is no longer physically with them. He is also trying to lessen the shock of the events he knows are coming next – his arrest, trial and death. Here, Jesus reaches forward to the assurances of the ascension and Pentecost, while also addressing the very real fear felt by the disciples at the Last Supper – they know something cataclysmic is going to happen, they have sensed the hostility towards them in Jerusalem, but they don't know when, or how, the terror will strike and they are afraid that they don't have the tools to cope with the demands thrust upon them.

Jesus reminds his followers that if they keep his commandments then they are well equipped. When they adopt his own model of love then it will be possible for them to break the bounds of expectation. The physical presence of Jesus is not necessary for a relationship with him to grow. But what is vital is the presence of the love of God in the life of the community. Bound up with this is Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit blowing through followers of Jesus, both individually and collectively, giving them comfort, energy, help and guidance – all they need to equip them for what lies ahead.

Brunel's sceptical public viewed his majestic tunnel as something

noxious and threatening, a sign of huge changes ahead. Similarly, Jesus' disciples were gripped by overwhelming fears – of imminent loss, separation and confusion in the face of hostility.

Fear continues to be a great driver in the world today, particularly at the present time. It affects both individuals and communities. Jesus' words, addressed to his disciples, are designed to shine a light of love right through that tunnel of anxiety. Even at the deepest point of darkness God does not abandon us. In our human weakness we can become motivated or imprisoned by fear. It affects our choices, fuels our media and fractures our society. But Jesus wants to remind us that this isn't the only way. Like Brunel's tunnel filtering the sun's rays, we do have the means to see right through it – faith and trust in Jesus will help us through our dark tunnels of fear. Listening, loving, allowing the Spirit of the Gospel to mould and shape us are vital if we are not to be orphaned by fear. So too is hope – hope in the promises and assurances that Jesus gives us. We know his infinite love for us and that we can put our trust in him.