

Acts 7. 55 – end

John 14. 1 – 14

Fr Alex

Although in our Gospel reading today we've jumped back before the events of Holy Week, it's a familiar theme that we've heard over these weeks of Easter: how to cope without the physical presence of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene tried to hold on to Jesus at the empty tomb, but Jesus said that he must leave her. Thomas couldn't believe in the resurrection until he could see and touch the physical body of Christ. Jesus vanished from the disciples on the Emmaus road just at the moment they realised who he was.

Today Jesus has just told his disciples that he must leave them – and it will be because of his death. They're dismayed; they're desperate to hold on to him. And of course, who could blame them? We would be the same, if we could come face to face with Jesus and learn from him, and experience his love. We would not want to let him go.

But conversely it's a sign of the depth of Jesus' love for them that he *doesn't* stay with them. As he says elsewhere, "it is for your advantage that I go away."

Because he is giving them, and us, something even better than his presence with them in one place and one time; he is blessing the world with his spiritual presence in all places and all times – and in all sorts of different ways.

We believe that Jesus makes himself truly present to us in our worship. You will have heard your preachers say words to that effect very often. But what exactly do we mean by that? How can we experience the presence of Jesus when we can't see him or touch him or talk to him?

Our liturgy helps us enter into the mystery of Christ's eternal presence with us in two very beautiful and powerful ways. We signify the presence of Jesus first with the offering of incense; and also in another way that you might not have noticed: the offering of a kiss.

Incense has been burnt to signify the presence of God for many millennia. It is one of the earliest ways of worshipping the divine that we know of. Incense was burnt before the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence on earth in the Jerusalem temple. The gift of incense was offered to the infant Jesus by the Magi, as a symbol of his divinity.

Kissing is mentioned in the Old Testament as a form of divine blessing; before he dies, Isaac kisses his son Jacob and blesses him, passing on his status as God's chosen to the next generation. When Saul is made King, the prophet Samuel anoints him with oil, but he also kisses him as a sign of the divine favour.

Mary Magdalene signifies the kingly divinity of Jesus when she anoints his feet with oil and kisses them. In a perversion of this beautiful symbol, Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities

by means of a kiss; we hear the depth of this betrayal in Jesus' anguished words, "Judas, is it with a *kiss* that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

So the offering of incense and the offering of a kiss both signify to us that Jesus is present to us in the Mass. But it's *where* we offer these things that reveals to us *how* he makes himself present.

First, at the altar. As the priest enters at the beginning of the service, the first thing he does is kiss the altar, and then offer incense [of course we don't offer incense at this early Low Mass, but you'll just have to imagine it for today.]

It is a symbol of Jesus' promise that he will always be with us whenever we break bread and share wine together, as he commanded us to do. By a wonderful mystery, Christ enters into the bread and the wine, and they become for us his body and his blood; and we carry his presence with us through the doors of the church and into the world.

We become living temples of his divine presence, when we eat and drink this holy meal in faith.

The second place we offer incense and a kiss is at the proclamation of the gospel. The deacon censens the gospel book before reading from it, and at the end of the passage, the deacon kisses the book.

It reminds us that Jesus is present to us in his word. He is the living Word, the Word who became flesh and lived among us; the Word who enters into our minds and hearts as we hear the holy scriptures and are transformed by what they teach us.

The third place we offer incense and a kiss is perhaps a little more subtle, but no less powerful because of it. It is at the sharing of the peace. Now we share a handshake or maybe a hug; but in days past worshippers would share a kiss.

St Paul instructs members of the churches in Rome and Corinth to "greet one another with a holy kiss," and this entered into the liturgy as early as the 2nd Century.

At the moment of the peace, when we are supposed to set aside our differences and reconcile with each other before receiving the sacrament, a kiss is a powerful commitment to peace and togetherness; an intentional rejection of that kiss of Judas that served only to tear apart, and divide.

By the Middle Ages in England at least, a direct kiss had been replaced with something called a pax board – a 'peace' board – usually a wooden board on a pole that would be passed around and kissed by each person in turn. It became even more sanitised and turned into our very English sharing of a formal handshake; and since Covid, there's sometimes no physical contact at all. But there are good reasons for that too.

But our sharing of the peace is a direct descendant of that long tradition of blessing with a kiss that goes back to Mary Magdalene at the feet of Jesus; and back even further to Samuel and Saul, and beyond.

And we offer incense at this moment too; during the offertory, after the priest has censed the gifts that the congregation has offered to be blessed and shared in our holy meal, the thurifer brings the incense to the congregation and censes you; signifying that *you* are becoming a holy offering, in lives consecrated to God.

And so this is the third way that Jesus makes himself present to us in the Mass: in our shared life together, and our relationships with one another. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," he said; and we reveal the presence of Jesus whenever we share our love and friendship, and build one another up in faith.

In the sacrament; in the word; in our life together: our Lord is truly present to us, just as powerfully as he was to the disciples at the empty tomb, in the locked room, and on the road.

May we rejoice in that wonderful presence and continue to seek it with all our heart, today and always. Amen.