It’s easy to forget the turmoil the disciples are experiencing at this point in John’s Gospel. Entirely unexpectedly, right out of the blue, Jesus has suddenly announced that he is leaving them. No wonder they feel – to use the word Jesus himself uses here in verse 18 – ‘orphaned’. Jesus, this extraordinary figure they have got used to being with and following as ‘Teacher and Lord’ is about to abandon them. Just imagine how they must have been feeling. Not dissimilar, perhaps, to how we have felt from time to time during lockdown, especially those of us who are on our own – abandoned, uncertain about what’s going on, fearful for the future.

So what does Jesus want them to go away with? Well, we find a number of different strands in John chapters 14 to 16 – with the few verses chosen for today’s Gospel reading spelling out something which we might find rather surprising. And that’s the relationship, when it comes to us and God, between love and obedience. Even though I won’t be around to keep an eye on what you’re doing, says Jesus, keep on obeying me as if I was!

The American humorist Erma Bombeck wrote that she “…had the meanest parents in all the world. When I was seven years old they dared to discipline me just because I told them I wouldn’t do what they asked me to do to help around the house. My friend next door never got disciplined. He didn’t have to do what they asked me to do to help around the house. My friend next door never got disciplined. He had nice parents.

“I had the meanest parents. I had to eat all my broccoli and carrots before they would ever let me have pudding. My friend next door never had to eat vegetables. He always had things like burgers and milk-shakes and ice cream and chocolate.

“I had the meanest parents. They made me go to church every Sunday and sit there in those boring services week after week. (Obviously not an Anglican church then!) My friend next door could do as he pleased. He never went to church. Sunday was a fun day for him.

“I had the meanest parents. They made me work for my pocket money. I had to get a job helping an old lady with jobs around the house. My friend next door never had to do anything and he was given four times as much pocket money as I could ever earn. He had nice parents.

“Or so I once thought. But when I became an adult, I discovered that my parents were not so mean after all. I was experiencing the pleasure of work, the reward of recreation, the strength of a healthy body, the bonds of a strong marriage, the inward confidence that comes from faith and the wonderful supportive fellowship that comes from the Church as a community of believers.

“As for my friend next door, things were not going so well: he was not enjoying his work, nothing seemed to satisfy him, he was having difficulty getting along with people who were not willing to do everything just as he thought he knew it ought to be done, his marriage had not lasted even two years, his body was getting out of shape, and he had a cynical way of looking at life which spoilt it rather than enriched it.”

Perhaps this helps to throw some light on what’s going on here as Jesus says ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’. We’re inclined to think that love doesn’t really belong in the same breath as obedience to commands. But Jesus is telling his followers that it does. That his commands express his love for us and that obeying them enables us to express our love for him. That his commands are good for us and that obeying them enable us to make the impact he intends us to have on the world around us. That loving him isn’t just about how we feel. It’s also about what we actually do.
But I wonder whether you ever find that knowing what we should do doesn’t always enable us actually to do it. This is what leads Jesus to say what comes next. It’s what provides the key for our understanding of the connections between the resurrection of Jesus at Easter, which we have been celebrating for the last five weeks, his return to heaven on Ascension Day, which awaits us this coming Thursday, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which we look forward to in two weeks’ time.

“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…”

The word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit is a notoriously multi-layered and tricky one to translate. ‘Advocate’ is OK but doesn’t necessarily ring all the right bells. Some of the older versions of the Bible use the word ‘Comforter’ which gives us a bit more of a clue – though not in the rather fluffy way in which we usually use the word. So what is Jesus getting at?

Suppose that as one of our organists is playing the organ they come across the musical instruction ‘con forza’. What does they do? Well, the answer is that they pull out a few more stops and give us the full benefit of what the organ is capable of. ‘Con forza’ means ‘with strength and force’, giving it everything you’ve got. That’s what ‘comforter’ means here. The Holy Spirit is the one who will replace Jesus himself in the experience of his followers. He will be for all time and in every place spiritually what Jesus has been physically and so necessarily limited in time and space. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside to strengthen them, to give them power on the inside to live as God intends them to, to fulfil the commands of Jesus.

A student named Steve was taking an exam in Logic – in how to think properly and work things out. The exam was looming and everyone was getting a bit worried. But a few days beforehand their teacher said that each student would be allowed to bring in a single sheet of A4 paper with as much as they could fit on the one sheet to refer to during the test. On the day of the exam, each student came to school clutching their precious piece of paper crammed with as much information as possible. But when Steve walked in, his piece of paper was completely blank. He was accompanied by his friend Josh who was a bit older than he was and had passed his exam in Logic with flying colours a few years previously. Steve bent down and placed his single, blank sheet of paper on the floor next to his desk. And then Josh stood on the paper. The teacher asked Steve what was going on. “Ah, yes sir,” said Steve, “the thing is, you said we could bring in whatever we could fit on a single piece of paper for help on this test. Well, this is my help and he can fit on the paper!” Would you have given him an ‘A’? Maybe, maybe not!

A few weeks after Jesus said these words about the Holy Spirit to his friends, one of those friends, Peter, was explaining to the crowds who had gathered what following Jesus, being a Christian, is all about. Here’s what he said: “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38).

That’s it – the essence of the Christian Faith: pardon for the past and power for the future. Forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, making Jesus real to his followers and enabling them to live for him. As the words of next Sunday’s collect put it, O God the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you, leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us... To which may our heartfelt response be ‘Yes, Lord, Amen.’