

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday of Easter

9th May 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Friends are one of life's most precious gifts. They listen to us, make us laugh, accept us, care for us, challenge us, steady us, help us pick up the pieces of what is broken, and inspire us to be better versions of ourselves. William Penn wrote that a true friend: 'advises justly, assists readily, adventures boldly, takes all patiently, defends courageously, and continues a friend unchangeably'.

What is the place of friendship in the Christian life? Why does Jesus, in our Gospel reading today (which forms part of the 'farewell discourses' to his disciples during the meal they shared on the night before his death), say that he is calling them not 'servants' but 'friends'?

Enduring friendships are instructive. Our best friendships teach us how to love, and to love better. They teach us forgiveness, patience, kindness and justice. They are where we learn hospitality, generosity, mercy and compassion. We catch glimpses of the eternal in the everyday, the beyond in the midst, and we see how we can become channels of the love of God to others. Jesus is suggesting, on the night before he was betrayed, that friendship is a primary setting in which we love one another and grow in the skills needed to bring that

love to the world. He modelled the best of that love. And we are asked to go out and do the same – loving others as we have been loved. To bear much fruit.

One sentence in our reading often puzzles people: ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you’. We don’t normally associate friendship with being given commands. But a friend is someone who changes you by knowing them. If we stop to think about it, friends often influence the way we think and act. At its simplest, we say: ‘I used to make the recipe that way until I met Eléonore, and now I make it this way.’ ‘I used to think left-handed people were useless at sport until I met Henri, and now I think differently.’ What we are given here is a promise that we will be influenced by Jesus. Or we could look at it another way: if we don’t do anything Jesus says, in what sense *are* we his friends?

There is a deeper layer to this, and it’s about how we understand our relationship with God. Jesus, knowing that he is about to die, gives his followers the tools they need to equip them for living beyond tomorrow. He is effectively saying: ‘There is one word that sums up what all this is about: friends. I am passing on everything to you that I have learned from the one I call *Abba*, Father.’ And, as Christ’s friends, the disciples are saying in return: ‘we are allowing ourselves to be changed by knowing you’. We are happy for our lives to be reshaped because of our commitment to you.

Jesus might have added this about the word ‘friends’: ‘In some languages the word translates to ‘companions’, which means the one you eat bread with, and that is what we are doing tonight. So, if you ever forget what I have just told you, the thing I want you to go on doing is to go on being each other’s companions by breaking bread together, and then when you do that you will

remember that it is all about being friends of God, friends of one another, friends with creation and, possibly the hardest of all, learning to be your own friend.' Our response to the undeserved grace of all that will be found in the fruit that we bear.

It has been said that Christianity is not a noun but a verb. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is about love in action, a radical call to live differently. A love that, as Paul says in his letter to the church in Corinth, 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'. The definition of God's love is God's actions. We tend to think of love in terms of feelings. But we experience the reality of God's love in its results. For it is a love which creates, redeems, bears fruit, restores what has been broken, completes what is unfinished, and gives itself to the point of death.

Jesus speaks to his disciples of joy: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' Faced with the suffering that lies ahead, it might be a strange word to find here. Yet there is something about Jesus's obedience to the Father's will that gives him a freedom which others around him lack. He is somehow freer than all the people who bring about his death, held as they are in the grip of struggles for power and domination. The same is true of the Pharisees who so often challenged him for breaking the purity codes of which they considered themselves the guardians. All of these were acting out of fearfulness. Jesus instead acts out of love. Greater love has no one than this. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, 'O God who art the author of peace and lover of concord ... whose service is perfect freedom'. If we love our neighbour as ourselves, we are freed to live openly, with generosity and with joy.

Our Epistle reading, from the first Letter of John, shows how this works out in practice: 'For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.' Love in action. It's been pointed out that when all is said and done, you know what a Christian is. It isn't about being versed in theology. It isn't about holding a set of 'fundamental' beliefs dictated by others who will tell you that you need to believe them in order to go to heaven (even though there are plenty of people around who will suggest that's what being a Christian is). No – fundamentally, it's about love in action. It's about being the ones who turn up when someone is in trouble. It's being the ones who put themselves out to help others. It's being the ones who, quietly and undemonstratively, live out the Beatitudes and the acts of mercy described in Chapter 25 of St Matthew's Gospel: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...' (25.35). And it's about being the same people who are surprised when they are told that was something exceptional: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?' (25.37) ... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me' (25.40). You know them when you meet them.

'For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.' Jesus said: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another.' (John 15.12) God isn't asking something impossible of us. However disorientating this last year has been, for our lives and our habits and even sometimes our faith, let us remind ourselves of that – who we are and what we are about, as followers of Christ. And may we be known, as he asks of us, by the fruit that we bear.

Amen.