

Sermon at St John the Evangelist on 6th Sunday of Easter, 26.5.19

Acts 16.9-15. Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5. John 14. 23-29

They are words etched on my mind and in my heart, because they came to me at a particular point of transition and challenge in my own life and ministry – some 11 years ago.

I was three years into my first incumbency, as rector of a substantial parish on the northern edge of Leicester, and I was floundering. Not outwardly, because on the surface things seemed to be going well – four very differing Sunday congregations, across two churches; plenty of families, as well as elderly people; a large number of occasional offices; schools work; and (something I loved) lots of pastoral visiting.

But I knew that I was running on empty... And neither the parish nor I seemed to be able to do anything about it. It wasn't just that life – like many professional people today – was hopelessly out of balance and I couldn't see a way through; but it was also that I knew I had a deep yearning for a fuller experience of God, yet was unable to find it and draw from it. I was like a hamster in a wheel, running round in circles, ever faster, but not really going anywhere, and certainly incapable of stepping off the wheel, to find true rest and peace in God.

And then one day, as was my habit from time to time, I pitched up at our Diocesan retreat house (Launde Abbey), and spent the day in silence and in prayer – as well as roaming the hills, looking for answers, and interrogating God about why I was so stuck... And with my tatty Bible in hand, I stumbled upon the most amazing words of Jesus, hidden in the heart of John's Gospel, which I'd never noticed before, and which have stayed with me ever since, beginning a quiet revolution in my faith and discipleship, which in time turned my whole life up-side down, and which still fuels my outlook, even to this day:-

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.' (John 14.23, the opening words of today's Gospel).

Speaking to the disciples in his poignant Farewell Discourses, at a critical point of transition for them – just prior to his passion and death – Jesus makes a bold claim, to reassure them and to guide them. In fact it's so fundamental that, if you look at John 14 as a whole, Jesus says it three times, in quick succession, using slightly different words each time.

And what Jesus says is this: If you truly love me and follow me – keeping my commandments – then you will never be alone, for I will come and dwell with you; in fact not just I, but God himself (notice the 'we'), will come and make our 'home' with you. It is an astonishing claim.

We, says Jesus – pointing to the Trinity of Love, which is the Father, the Son – Jesus himself – and His Holy Spirit, will come and be with you (will abide, and dwell with you) forever.

It is an astonishing claim, and echoes – in the Old Testament – the way in which God dwelt with his people, of old, in the tabernacle, in the desert; and then in the Jerusalem Temple, as he had first revealed himself to Moses, on Mount Sinai, as the great 'I am'. 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' Yes, the God who is all holy and all loving and all powerful; the God who made the world and revealed himself to the people of Israel; the God who took human form in the person of Jesus Christ; the God who abides as sacred Trinity of Love; He will also, says Jesus, abide in

the hearts of believers, who love Jesus and keep his commandments. He will make his home with us, in our hearts, granting us that peace – that abundance of Shalom, that indwelling Spirit of wisdom and love – that the world cannot give.

In other words, says Jesus – and as it suddenly occurred to me, as I listened to God's Word in a new way – at the heart of everything (of our faith and church, and worship and service, and of all our experience and hopes and dreams) is a profound but simple indwelling with God, in the heart; a reciprocal relationship of love and trust and communion;

which roots us and refreshes us, and refashions us, and fuels our whole life and work as Christians in this world. Loving Jesus, whole-heartedly, praying to him and abiding in him, and seeking (however much we stumble and fall) together, to follow his commandments (his words), to live in community, to love our neighbours, and to grow in the transforming knowledge and love of God, day-by-day.... It is, if it's true - & I believe it is – a life-changing reality.

'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

Well I'm not going to share with you now the story of what happened next – for me, for my family, for my congregations, in terms of my prayer life or ministry, as it developed, over the next eight years in Leicestershire, and beyond – but I want to ponder for a moment, what it might mean for us here, at St John's, how Jesus' words and vision might be relevant for us too...

And it raises the question of what lies at the heart of our Church, and what fuels our mission and growth, let alone our sustainability and survival – in a demanding, at times conflicted and often distracted culture today, a microcosm of the wider society, in the process of shaking off one leader in the search of another, and all because we can no longer agree on what we're here for, the values we stand by.

The disciples are easily distracted, as the church has always been. After all there are so many things which can hold our attention, so many fears and suspicions and subsidiary agendas that take centre stage in our tendency to want to control what's going on. But Jesus draws us back to what lies at the centre – where the Spirit of God is most powerfully at work – and to what is really, in the end, very simple, if often hidden from view. Namely the mysterious ever active presence of God, and a relationship of love, as we love Jesus and follow him, and as he in turn blesses us with his presence and peace. A love which is multi-dimensional: transforming our deep relationship with God, in prayer & worship; our relationship with each other, as brothers and sisters; and overflowing in hospitality and service to the world around us, wherever we find ourselves and whatever we're called to be and to do.

A week ago I attended a gathering of our Partnership for Missional Church spiritual leaders, and at one point Nigel – our facilitator, from the Church Mission Society – asked what is the most important task of leadership for the Church today; what is the hidden secret of the church, whether big or small, rich or poor, surviving and thriving, around the world. And you know what he said? Digging wells. Yes. Digging wells. Think about that for a moment...

In other words the task of your Priest in Charge & PCC & Ministry Team, at the end of the day, is not managing an organisation or developing grand plans for our future, or being a kind global CEO of St John's Ltd, but simply digging wells...

– drawing us back to Jesus and his Word, living and active in our midst; to His Spirit, which brings peace; and to loving hospitality and service of one another, at the root of our discernment of the particular mission that God is calling us to in the world.

For it is from the living wells – of God’s transforming presence; our relationship with God, in prayer and worship from the heart, and of our being with and trusting in one another in love, that all else flows. The love of Jesus at the centre of our life and worship, our work and mission; indeed of all that we are and think and say and do. The one true foundation – as Chris testified last week – on which we must build; Hearts wide open, whatever our differences, to one another and to the Lord. As the remarkable Catholic philosopher and founder of the L’Arche Communities, who died earlier this month, wrote:

‘Jesus calls his followers to love, to love one another as he loves them; not just to love others as one loves oneself. He proposes something new; to love others with the very love of God; to see them with the eyes of the Lord. And we can only see and love them like that if we ourselves have experienced Jesus loving us with a liberating love. It is only then that we can open ourselves and become vulnerable and grow to greater openness to others.’

For at the heart of everything, as Vanier knew – from his own experience and life of prayer – and unlocking the particular gifts of its members, is love, the love of Jesus, deep within the heart. For like Lydia in our NT reading from Acts, we are each called to open our hearts to the Lord, and so to allow his word and transforming work (with all its rich possibilities) to take root in our world today. For as Jesus reminds us, if we truly love him & keep his commandments, he will indeed come and dwell with us and make his home with us; empowering us & setting us free to love him & serve him with joy forever. *Amen*