

Sunday 25th April 2021

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.
God is ever present, around us and within us,
though separate let us worship together in God.

Do not overlook the life of the shepherd.

A shepherd puts his flock first, finds the best pasture, protects them from danger, does not desert them in danger and knows each one instinctively. Sheep know their shepherd, they recognise the shepherd's voice and follow where he leads, most of time, and if one strays the shepherd seeks it until the flock is one again. This is love.

Suggested Hymn Let there be love shared among us
Listen [here](#)

Prayer

Loving God, creator and sustainer of life in all its forms, the energy which binds the universe and beyond, we gather together, following the way of Jesus, and offer you our praise and thanksgiving. We thank you for the wonder of life, the mysteries of creation and the variety of nature which when working in harmony provides all that is needed. When we create disharmony through greed and thoughtlessness, we hurt you and we hurt one another and for this we ask mercy and forgiveness. We thank you for the wonder of humanity, the uniqueness of each person, the mysteries of skills and talents which enrich our life together, and the bond within which we are held in your love. When we forget that we are held together, that we are one and called to care for each other we hurt you and we hurt one another and for this we ask mercy and forgiveness. We thank you for the church which is a tangible expression of your love, and for the life and ministry of Jesus which guides our way and challenges us to new ideas about our life together. When we forget your challenge to explore new ideas and reach for new understanding, we hurt you and we hurt one another and for this we ask mercy and forgiveness. In the knowledge of your merciful and forgiving love we pause and reflect on how we will respond and in prayer we seek your guidance.

Lord's Prayer

Readings Acts 4:5-12
 1 John 3:16-24

Story The Snail and the Whale by Julia Donaldson
Watch [here](#)

Suggested Hymn For I'm building a people of power
Listen [here](#)

Reflection

In Acts 4 we read of Peter challenging the high priests about their rejection of Jesus. He uses a quote from psalm 118, familiar to any pharisee or scribe. The image of a cornerstone is recurring theme throughout scripture, and although we have no idea if Peter had a Judaic background, it may be safe to assume that living and travelling with Jesus he would have come across this image, particularly as Psalm 118 a Psalm used in the liturgy of great feasts. Peter quotes it with a twist, 'the stone which was rejected by YOU, the builders, has become the cornerstone.' Peter recognises the place of the high priests as builders but is pointing out that they are wrong in rejecting Jesus, for he is the cornerstone around which a new expression of faith will be built.

This new expression of faith is to be built on love rather than ritual, for that was the message of Jesus, the kingdom is not about words and speech but about truth and action and we see this picked up by the Johannine tradition in the first letter of John. Our passage is an interesting passage and for many quite challenging because of its language, its words and speech, so how might we in our twenty-first century world understand this passage? I would like to take a moment to explore that in more detail and I offer five points for reflection.

1. v16 ¹⁶*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* How did Jesus lay down his life for us? Many hymns invite us to sing of a ransom paid, that Jesus' death was the 'price of sin', our sin, and others tell of the redemption factor of Jesus' death on the cross but personally, I struggle with these ideas. To whom was the ransom paid and was not Jesus forgiving sins before his death, and is this assumption that we are all sinners a little arrogant? Instead, because of our knowledge of Jesus we can build a new relationship with God, but without the stories of his death and more importantly the resurrection appearances there is a good chance the message of Jesus would have been forgotten. A message of love beyond all love, the love of a shepherd for his sheep. Jesus fought for his message, died for his message and appeared again for his message and he calls his disciples to continue spreading his message.
2. Moving on to verse 17, we are asked to consider if we are demonstrating that gracious love if we have something someone else needs and we do not share. Love is truth and action not words and speech. We can sit together in worship once a week, or seven times a week but if all we do is talk about love we are not being disciples. When we follow the way of Jesus, we are called to let love guide our every decision, to choose the highest way with no compromise and no conditions, the truth, then we know God in the fullest sense, for that moment we are one. When we fall short, fail to hit that target, then because of Jesus' message we know we still abide in God's love, but we have work to do.
3. Every time we hit the target our knowledge of God grows deeper and the more we hit the target the easier it becomes to choose the highest way. The deeper we journey the less we hold onto self and the more loving we become.
4. v22 *'we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.'* Some see this as a reward, do the right thing and you will get all your wishes. In some way that is true, but what I think this is really saying is when you live in love you will not ask for selfish things but only those things which build up the community and the world, things for the greater good. When we engage in this deepest prayer, we 'know' that our prayer stems from seeking the kingdom, we participate through prayer and action in changing the reality of the world.
5. Loving one another is the essence of Jesus message, it is a love which reaches out, a love which changes reality, a love which opens doors and creates opportunities, a love which builds. We are called to be builders, building the kingdom around the love which Jesus demonstrated and which we know when we truly know God.

I was reading this week about Richard of Victor, a twelfth century theologian and philosopher, who suggested that God is best described as friendship. He explores the notion that it is possible to be good on your own, but to be friends requires two, however he suggests we need to be three to be joy-filled and happy, and he sees God as joy-filled and happy so God must be three, a reworking of the idea of the trinity. Love he suggests involves an initiator, a reciprocator and a beneficiary and likens this to parental love, two humans sharing together in a love for another. This is his definition of friendship. In our modern world of Facebook and What's app we often hear of people having thousands of friends, but rarely is this real friendship. There are people we know, there are acquaintances, and then there are friends, the people who walk with us through our hopes and our fears, the people we can be open and honest with, the people who we may see or speak to irregularly but with whom we can pick up our conversation where we left off.

Godly love is self-transcending, it has to go beyond, to overflow and it is best demonstrated when two, or more, people work together for the benefit of another. This got me thinking about church and how it is an expression of God, of love. Church should be a place of friendships, not simply being friends, but a demonstration of that true friendship that is working together for the benefit of another. Also, a place of building friendships and offering opportunities for a deeper expression of friendship. For many churches there is a sweet memory of doing things together but over time circumstances have changed and now church is often little more than meeting once a week to worship together and that does not offer the opportunity for building deep friendships. For that,

we need house groups and bible studies as well as projects we work on, without that anyone new coming to church will not have the same experience or the same opportunity to know God through church.

We are called to be builders, builders of the friendship that is God. We may no longer be able to do the things we once did, maturity brings new challenges, but it is not about giving things up so much as letting them go. If we become obsessed with what we can no longer do, we will miss the opportunities for new expressions of being God in the world. It may mean working in new groups, expanding our horizons and sharing responsibilities. It might mean letting go of self, of our 'church' and becoming something new in unity with others who find themselves struggling for the same or different reasons. Maybe their building is no longer suitable, but they can still do things we cannot do on our own but together we can be builders.

We have all been challenged by Covid and its consequences, and we have missed our friends and our friendships, but we have also learnt to do things differently and as we move forward it may mean letting go of something we have cherished but which is no longer a true expression of being church and embracing a new opportunity.

In the Snail and The Whale, we read of an unlikely friendship but one which changes the lives of others. Oneness is about knowing God, recognising God's love as expressed through a shared passion for making a difference, and building a place of opportunity for anyone and everyone. We are builders and we are shepherds in a world that is still caught in a system of fear and injustice but together we are love.

Suggested Hymn

Christ be our light

Listen [here](#)

Prayers

Loving God we gather in love to listen and share, and to encourage one another in our journey to the kingdom. As we meet, we bring to you our concerns for the world and our commitment to making a difference. We pray for all those who feel alone and bereft of friendship, the sorrowing and grieving who miss their loved one, the lost and the lonely feeling isolated by circumstances and fear. May we build places of belonging in our communities.

Giving of ourselves in loving friendship may we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the world.

We lift to you the people the world forgets in its rush for the latest innovation, the hungry, the homeless, those who live far from medical aid and whose countries are ruled in a less than loving way. We think of the children trapped in poverty who work long hours for tiny sums on which they and their families must exist. May we challenge injustice in whatever form.

Giving of ourselves in loving friendship may we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the world.

We give thanks for those whose generosity makes a difference, key workers in our communities whose selfless service has shown the love of oneness. We recognise their tiredness and their frustration when communities ignore advice which would make a difference. May we encourage our communities to respond to love with love, by our example.

Giving of ourselves in loving friendship may we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the world.

We pray for governments around the world, for world leaders challenged with the care of their people. Recognising the financial burden that Covid has placed on all communities we pray for wisdom in decision making and justice in laws. Where injustice fuels tension and violence we pray for tolerance and acceptance, and peaceful protests that challenge inequality and discrimination. May we be a voice of love within our communities.

Giving of ourselves in loving friendship may we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the world.

We pray for our families and our friends who we have missed so much during the Covid restrictions and we pray that, working together, we can build a safe future for all in which we care for one another through our choices and our actions. May we build places of friendship and opportunity within our communities, greenhouses of hope, and may we be a place to dream the vision of the kingdom, and companions of your love on the road to a new world.

Giving of ourselves in loving friendship may we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the world.

In Jesus name. Amen

Offertory

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

Suggested hymn

We are one in the Spirit

Listen [here](#)

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.