John 15: 9 – 17 Sunday 9th May 2021 Sermon for All Saints/ St Godwold’s

Sermon prayer

Lord Jesus Christ nourish us through your word nurture and feed us through your grace, and your Spirit fill us with your love for your name’s sake. Amen

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus surprises us by lifting-up the image of friendship to describe his relationship with us. “I do not call you servants any longer. I have called you friends.” Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, calls us friends. This means, to borrow from our Quacker brothers and sisters, that the church is a society of friends united by the love Christ has for each of us. Yes, we are called to be servants, and apostles but we are also, by God’s grace, friends of Jesus.

Following the Resurrection and prior to his ascension Jesus shared with his disciples his vision for their life together, telling them that the love that united him with the Father now unites Jesus with his disciples and his disciples with one another.

“I’ve called you friends” In calling us friends Jesus has given us a new name, a new story, and Identity, not that we have chosen, but one that has been chosen and given to us. Before we are anything else, sisters, brothers, wives, husbands, white, black, we are friends of Jesus – we are Christians. We have been caught up in his story. By God’s grace we have been written into the story of Jesus and his church.

We typically think that our friends are those we choose because we share something in common or we like each other. But Jesus clearly reminds us that the basis for Christian friendship is much deeper. “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” From a disjointed and unlikely group of tax collectors, fishermen, women, sinners, religious zealots Jesus forms a society of friends whose life together is rooted in and grows out of their friendship with him. Being friends of Christ means we are graciously chosen – chosen not because of any inherent quality we may possess and chosen not for reward but for the responsibility of being obedient to Christ’s commandment of love.

Jesus not only told us to love he commanded us to love one another in the same way that he himself loves us. The love of Jesus for you and me went on and on until he sacrificed his own life from love of us. His explanation was the command, “that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” this love is without limit. The Christian interpretation of love is an act of will, a determination to love someone even if they do not love you in return, whether they seem grateful for your love, or even if they seem hostile, even if all feelings of love have evaporated from your heart. Christian love is a decision to love those you dislike as well as those you love. That includes your parents and your children, and the life partner whom you promised to care for “till death us do part.” The command also includes the obligation to love the enemy who hates you, the unknown African who is dying of starvation, and the homeless person with schizophrenia. This is no easy task this is the other side of the equation because it is very, hard to love people and situations of that nature, but Jesus never promised that it would be easy. He said, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

My guess is that there were many times when Jesus, in his human capacity found it difficult to love those who plotted and planned against him. And I can imagine there are times when he finds it difficult to love me, with all my faults but I believe he does. Even at his death on the cross Jesus prayed for the soldiers who drove the nails through his wrists. This is the test of true love, and therefore it is the test of whether we really mean it when we call ourselves a Christian. Would we be willing to sacrifice our own life to save the life of someone we love? To be confronted with such a challenge makes us feel uncomfortable and to wriggle in our seats. Why? When push comes to shove the answer is that we do not know how we would react. I personally hope I would but pray to God I shall never have to find out. Fortunately, most of us will never be put in that situation but even so there are many lesser challenges which each of us face many times in a day for instance how we choose to spend our time and money whether the choice is to spend on one’s - self or doing the loving thing for the sake of someone else. What we need to remember is that there is no love without sacrifice.

Jesus does not leave us to face this demanding challenge on our own he gives us the means of rising to it. He calls us to love others without limit precisely because that is how he loves us and knowing that Jesus loves us provides the impetus to follow his lead. “As I am loved so will I love.” We don’t have to make an effort to love other people, we simply have to let Jesus love them through us. If Jesus can love us, I am sure he can love our enemies we simply have to surrender to him the right to choose those whom we love. When we realize that for Jesus’ sake we can- not refuse to love anyone, we love them forever. As a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an elect nation remember we are set apart by God as his chosen people. What a wonderful gift? But this gift is also a command. We who were once strangers far off from the promises of God, have been brought near because Jesus made us his friends and invites us to be his friends in the world. Our way in the world is now to befriend any who are friendless, estranged from God and from one another. The church of which we are members points to the beloved kingdom of God where all are invited to gather around the table and share the feast of love in the name of the one who calls us his friends.