

First Sermon to the Cathedral Parish
Choral Eucharist, 6 May 2018 – The Sixth Sunday of Easter
The Very Reverend Dr Sarah Rowland Jones

“Abide in my love” John 15:9

Lord Jesus Christ, eternal Word of God made flesh, take these words and speak through them, take our minds and speak to them, take our hearts and set them on fire with your love. Amen.

Let me begin with extensive thank yous ... Many of you I have still not yet greeted personally, and I have a lot of listening and learning to do as I settle in, not least of names – and so apologies in advance if it takes a little time to remember everyone. I don't know if you've also found this, but in my conversations with others, I often find that the most important things they have to say, the things of which I have to take note and remember, tend to come right at the beginning, and right at the end. It can be true of Scripture too!

Yesterday, for the theme of my sermon, I chose words from the very beginning of St John's gospel, from the start of Jesus' earthly ministry. In fact, they were words of Mary to the servants, at the wedding of Cana – words to all of us who would be servants of the living God: 'Do whatever he tells you.' Today the Lectionary (the church's calendar of readings) gives us a passage from the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, from St John's account of Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper, the night before his crucifixion.

What is it that Jesus 'tells us to do' here? It is to love one another! What could be a better beginning for me, coming here, and for this new chapter of Cathedral life – that it should, above all else, be marked by love: receiving God's overwhelming, redeeming, healing, love, sharing that love with one another, and offering it to all who come here.

Love, eh? The Beatles sang 'All you need is love.' Yet when we say God is love, we have rather more in mind: a love that encompasses far more than sentiment. Godly love can also be love that is tough when needed; love that goes the extra mile; or just love that keeps on doing the loving thing out of determination and commitment even when we're too tired, too overwhelmed, or too weighed down to feel very loving.

The American poet Raymond Carver wrote the following delightful verse, entitled Late Fragment:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

What do you want from this life?

In our first reading, we find God's invitation to look deep within ourselves and acknowledge our greatest thirsts, our deepest yearnings, and bring them to him, for him to satisfy them, more than satisfy them. Sometimes we are afraid to look deep within ourselves. We may be afraid that we'll unearth something too big to handle, that will only leave us disappointed. 'Let well alone' sounds far wiser counsel.

But we are made in God's image, and within our deepest selves he plants yearnings that, like magnets, draw us to him, so he can delight in filling us with such good things that we could never imagine. His thoughts are so beyond ours, as the reading went on to remind us! So it is unsurprising that within us we do find that deep human need to know ourselves loved. For God's desire, shown so fully in Christ, is that we should know that we are his beloved: made, on purpose, just as we are, with all those traits of character, personality, appearance, and so forth within us that we like; and also with all those that we don't! He makes us unique, special, precious – we are the product of his delight, made flesh.

So, let God love you, and abide in that love. Let him fill you with his Spirit, to write his love-letters deep in your innermost self; and draw you into his life-giving purposes for his world.

For perhaps you might enunciate your deepest yearnings in other terms: the desire to live a life that is meaningful, and has purpose and significance. This yearning too is a gift of God, so that you might come to him, and hear his words, 'Abide in my love ... and you will bear fruit that will last.'

Unlike worldly success, good though it may be, what matters most in our lives are those words and actions which have significance that echoes through the years; and more than that, whose consequences carry into eternity. These are not always what we might consider the Big Things. When I look back on my life, often it is simple conversations that have had the biggest, and most lasting, impact. Yesterday, as I was made Dean, I was pondering all those who through my life have helped shape the person I have become, and the faith that overwhelms my life. How many there are who helped me come close to Jesus and know his love, often in very tangible, and soul-healing ways. This is fruit that lasts.

The God in whose love we are called to abide, calls us to share this love with others – and how can we not want those for whom we care to know the joys of his love? This brings me to this year's *Thy Kingdom Come* initiative. A couple of years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury intentionally built on the longstanding practice of praying earnestly from Ascension Day to Pentecost for the coming of the Spirit upon God's people and world, just as the first disciples waited in Jerusalem, as the risen Christ told them, in anticipation of being clothed with God's Spirit from on high. This year, the particular theme is to pray for 5 people you know, and to write their names on the small card you have been given. And to find out more, come to the evening service on Ascension Day, when our Preacher will be an old friend of mine and Bishop Joanna, the Very Revd John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry.

Finally, alongside our yearnings as individuals, and for others we know, what about our yearnings, our hopes, for the Cathedral? Do we not also want to bear fruit that lasts? We know so many already speak of the life-changing impact this place can have on them.

To do this, we just have to abide in God's love, and, as a community of the love of God, share that love with others. If you don't feel particularly loving (and I guess visitors can sometime be quite difficult!) don't worry: we can still grit our teeth and determinedly do the loving thing, confident that God will pour his love into our hearts and lives.

So, to sum up: we just have to do whatever he tells us, which is, first and foremost, to abide in his love. May we do so, by God's grace. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-11; Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17