

The United Reformed Church (St Ives)

Sunday 9th May 2021.

Sixth Sunday in Easter.

Service by Dr Christine Macleod

Call to worship

Let us worship God,

God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth

Opening sentence

Jesus says 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, abide in my love'

Readings

Psalm 98.

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things.

His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory.

The Lord has made known his victory;

He has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;

Break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,

with the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn

make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Let the sea roar, and all that fill it;

the world and those who live in it.

Let the folds clap their hands;

Let the hills sing together for joy

at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness and the people with equity.

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, 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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the Master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another'.

Prayer and the Lord's prayer.

Thankyou for friends. They come in all shapes and size, with likes and dislikes, joys, and sorrows. We share and learn from one another, console each other, talk until the sun goes down.

Thanks, that Jesus chooses us as his friends, wanting the best for us and calling us to go and bear fruit, living lives of love.

Forgive us when we misunderstand others or take friendships for granted.

Help us to be still in the love of Christ and the love of each other.

Let us be glad that our God will judge the world with righteousness and the people with equity.

We pray together as Jesus taught us to pray. Our Father who art in heaven.....

Reflection

Friends have been such a blessing during these months of the pandemic. Virtual coffee chats. Socially distanced exercise. Sharing photos on social media. Visiting in a pod. Keeping in touch by phone or letter. The distance separating us may make us more aware of deep friendships, those who care about us and help us cope and find our way. Keeping in touch takes more effort, as we do not just casually meet up anymore. Friends can be contacted to help us in time of trouble and advise on perplexing situations. It is a delight to have friends who bring hope for better things to come.

This reading today talks about a deep friendship with Jesus. I searched my iPad on 'friends' and discovered the top hit was the American TV series called "Friends", a light comedy to entertain, but not to interact with. Second top was commercial adverts. Advertising cards with ready-made kind words for friends. A commercial take on being a friend.

In the Old and New Testament, the ideas of friend and friendship involve association, loyalty, and affection. John allows us to explore what friendship with Jesus means to us. The disciples had travelled with Jesus for quite some time. Now the disciples are invited to view their soon to depart Lord in anew light, to accept a relationship of intimacy and reciprocity.

I know that with my close friends I can share things that matter to me with them. Jesus tells the disciples that he considers them as friends, not as servants. He says that what distinguishes servants from friends is that friends have been let in on the plans. The disciples for instance, are told about the coming crises and Jesus impending departure. They are not kept in the dark about what is happening, and what is going to happen. There is an intimacy there.

Often, we choose our friends. However, it is lovely to be chosen as a friend. Sometimes we are chosen to do with common interests such as sport, or through sharing joint experiences in our work and hobbies. Association grows into friendships. What is so encouraging is that Jesus chooses the disciples and us as friends. We are chosen for bearing lasting fruit, for an abiding productiveness in God's reign. There is no need to compete for the friendship of Jesus – the offer is there. We know the affection of Christ. Through his sacrifice for us on the cross, from the very beginning the disciples and us will be deeply indebted to the one who calls us His friends.

There are expectations of trust in our friendships. Many a friendship can be lost because of a breach of trust. At times I have been grateful for the rebuke of a friend in love, proving more faithful than a flatterer (Proverbs 27 v6). However, there are limits in our human friendships. Even if a friend does not lead us astray, the friend may cause grief through misunderstanding. I have noticed how much people pray that their leaders are trustworthy and good. Jesus is totally good. One on whom we can rely. Jesus asks us to keep his commandments. There are many examples in John. chapter 15 and verse 12 says – “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”.

And Jesus claims that he takes the directives from His Father, by which his whole career in the world is guided. Today's psalm extols some of the goodness of God in a psalm of praise.

The intimacy between God and Jesus is shown in John chapter 10 and verse 18 where Jesus says. ‘No-one takes it from me, but I lay it (my life) down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father’. He was secure in the knowledge that God can redeem.

Jesus' commandments form the script by which he lives, and this is the same script given to the disciples. “As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love”.

We can all recall times when we have felt loved and secure. Life often tosses us about and we can get hurt. We sometimes need to be reminded to come back in worship and to be shown what love is like. Love that reaches gently into hateful places and fills them with light, expands your heart, connects you to all of space and time. To let the love of Christ, pour through us and out to others. To abide in the love of Christ.

As the old hymn says – ‘Oh what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer’.

It is good to remind ourselves of that affection. To learn that to be a friend of Jesus means to be loved and chosen. And that affection reminds us of the affection we have for one another.

Friendship is talked about in terms of believers. However, Jesus was also the friend of the stranger. We are encouraged to “do good to all”. Jesus encourages his followers to invite needy strangers, not necessarily friends, to their tables (Luke 14 v12-14), and in the parable of the good Samaritan he extends the concept of neighbour to anyone in need.

Prayer based on Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

Lord help us in our friendships. Guide us in the way of love, in all our encounters.

For everything there is a season and purpose under heaven.

May we find friendships in all of life’s events. A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep, a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. We do not know what lies ahead, but we can rest in the knowledge of your loyalty and love. Help us to abide in your love and to love one another. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit guide us in service and in lives of fruitful service. Amen.

Blessing

Now go in peace, to love and serve the Lord; and the blessing of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit be with you forever. Amen.