

Sermon for 21 May 2017 at 6.00pm (Easter 6)

Commissioning Sidespeople

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Sometime ago, a member of our congregation said to me, “You know, it’s all about love really isn’t it? Just loving God and loving each other.” This was someone who was relatively new to faith, and whose recent spiritual journey had been one of questioning and adventure --- but who had understood quickly a truth at the core of our Christian belief. “It’s all about love – loving God and loving each other.”

Tonight’s readings brim with teaching about the inestimable extent of God’s love for both his Son and for us. The word “love” appears at least 5 times in the Gospel passage and in the reading from Acts we hear about a God who “gives to all mortals life and breath and all things” and who is “not far from each of us.” If we’re lucky, our human experience gives us some understanding of God’s love for us. We experience love in many forms and in many relationships and we know the joy and pain that comes with loving. We know about the giving and receiving of love and that as well as being close, love sometimes means letting go. Love can be hurtful, not reciprocated, but real love means hanging on in at whatever cost. At its best the love in our lives is our greatest joy and treasure.

However, all of this is a pale reflection of the true extent of God’s love. As Jesus explains to his disciples, God’s love is ever present; they -- and we --will never be deserted or abandoned. It is a love which has provided salvation through the sacrifice of his only Son. It is a love which promises the presence of the Holy Spirit among the disciples – and among us – to uphold and strengthen, to comfort and to heal and to plead our case before God and the world with forgiveness and understanding. Above all it is a love which makes another powerful promise—a promise that all who follow Jesus will become partners in a three- way relationship. He says, “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” In other words they will still be connected to their source of meaning, joy and hope. Jesus will continue to be with them as a powerful, inspirational, internal force. Wonderfully, as disciples ourselves, that promise also includes us.

Jesus makes one final promise to all who hold fast to him and follow him uncompromisingly. He promises the gift of peace- a peace that comes with these assurances. We will see him again, plainly with the eyes of faith. We will live his new life. We will know him in the deepest theological sense, as we are joined to Jesus and to the Father by an unbreakable bond of love. This message

of God's love is desperately needed in a world that is still largely ignorant of it. In St. Paul's words there are many still, who "would search for God and perhaps grope for him"... often not knowing what it is they're seeking.

We have a calling to share and spread this wonderful message of love and hope. We are called to do that wherever we are, in our work, our leisure activities and within our community. Some may even be called to share the news in the wider world. But tonight, as we celebrate and give thanks for those whose ministry for God is to serve as sidespeople in this church, we think of the smaller world which is our church community. If we believe and accept the words of Jesus, "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you", they present us with an incredible challenge. We have to show God's presence in us to all those we meet. Our face in the world should reflect God's face, our smile, his smile, our welcome his welcome.

This makes the role played by our sidespeople and the duty wardens incredibly important. Theirs is the face of the first impression received by those who enter this building for a service. Many who come are regulars at church and it's good to greet our friends with a warm welcome. However, some who come are lonely, living in isolation from the wider community and for them the words of greeting are some of the few conversational exchanges they'll share during the day – or even the week. Some who arrive will be carrying burdens of pain, anxiety and sadness and the words of welcome may be a comfort or an opportunity to share the burden. And sometimes, those who come will be in search of God, groping for him; the way in which they are welcomed may influence for good or ill their next steps on a spiritual journey.

We are so lucky in the service of our sidepeople because we know they do a marvellous job. Our reputation is of a warm and welcoming church and for that we owe all of you heartfelt thanks. However, as in all ministry work, we mustn't become complacent and the job is always better achieved with the support of everyone. Whether or not we serve as a sidesperson, we all have a responsibility to show God's face to the world and that means that when those entering the church move inside and take their seats, the welcome must be continued by those who sit alongside. Sensitive companions during the act of worship come along side to make people feel comfortable, help with unfamiliar books, share a quiet word of explanation and later (after the service please!), chat and share an invitation to stay for coffee. In that, we are all sides people.

Witnessing to our God is a joy and a privilege and we're not asked to do it in our own strength. Remember Jesus' words. "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you". Remember, too, the words of a congregation member, "It's all about love --- loving God and loving each other."