

Farewell Sermon

Rev'd Canon Charles Jenkin – 5th September 2021

Ephesians 4.1-16

I, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.' (When it says, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up, in every way, into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

John 15.1-12

Jesus said to his disciples: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his 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.'

Sermon

One of the difficulties that we liberal western Christians have in reading the Bible, is that we tend to hear it with an individualistic mind-set. We hear it as primarily directed to people individually, whereas sometimes, often, the real meaning can only be accessed by realising that the text addresses faithful and unfaithful communities, not so much faithful individuals.

A good case in point is this deeply inspiring passage from St John's Gospel with the image of the vine which we heard this morning. If you hear it as basically addressed to individuals, it is frankly pretty harsh: removing fruitless branches; throwing them away to be burnt; and even the pruning

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sounds pretty unpleasant. Not much redemption there, is there? So an individualistic hearing of this text is actually at odds with the main thrust of the Gospel, the Good News, which is all about God's love and embracing in Christ of fallible human beings, despite all our sin and weakness and inadequacies.

Moreover, if we only hear the positive message individually too, then we miss the core teaching about the kind of faithful communities that churches need to be in order to grow, and to bear much fruit. It is churches that God prunes; it is churches that need to abide in the true vine, in Jesus. And it is fruitless churches that wither, and are thrown away, not the people within them. God does not throw away people.

Moreover, the "ask for whatever you wish" bit makes rather more sense of too, when you realise that it is not about individual people's desires, but about whole churches asking God for what they need in order to fulfil the mission of God. Why would God not grant such faithful prayer to those whom he calls? This is what the promise of answered prayer is really about.

It is plainly not true that individual Christians are granted whatever they pray for. We all have to learn that and deal with it. But when whole church communities pay real and faithful attention to what God is saying to them about their mission; and when they seriously pray together for what they need to order to carry out the mission of God; then the promise that such prayer will indeed be answered is valid; and faithful communities find that God is indeed faithful. And so it is that whole church communities are commanded by Jesus to love one another as he loves them. And so also in our first reading, the writer implores people to bear with one another, that the Body of Christ may be built together in love, and bear much fruit.

As I move on from St Mary-le-Tower after 13 years in post, it is clearly the case that although much has been achieved, much also remains to be done. Much is still to be done to ensure that St Mary-le-Tower is a fruitful church, which can flourish through this deeply testing time for the Church generally in our land; which can endure. Many challenges remain, and my successor, Tom, will need everyone's wholehearted support.

Our Choral Ministry, especially with young people, has been greatly blessed. But the challenge remains to fund this work in the long term. It is the case that as we have expanded our Choral Ministry over the last eight years, at the same time regular giving to St Mary-le-Tower has steadily fallen. This is plainly not sustainable in the long term. It has to change if the level of choral ministry with young people is to be sustained. This is a nettle still to be grasped, and it needs to be grasped by the community of St Mary-le-Tower as a whole, with everyone playing their part.

It might help to realise just how radical the Choral Ministry of St Mary-le-Tower is, in the way that it puts the involvement of young people to the fore. Choral Ministry is at the heart of this church, and young people are at the heart of that ministry, both in ministry to young people in developing their skills, faith and character, and also with young people leading, actually leading our worship week by week. Jesus said let the children come to me. How many churches can genuinely say, as we can do, that our work with young people is at the heart of our church life? How exciting is that! How absolutely is it worth everyone's generous support in so many ways!

A church cannot of course be just about music. God calls this his church, not only to inspiring worship, but also to be a community of welcome in the name of Jesus; welcoming people to this house of prayer on a daily basis, and caring for this historic house of prayer in the centre of Ipswich. And so we have invested in a CCTV system to make the church a safer place for staff and volunteers and visitors when the church is open to the public. And so we took advantage of a government grant to repair and redecorate the chancel sanctuary with all the disruption that meant at the time. Go and look at it, and dream of the whole church being redecorated like that. How wonderful would that be!

St Mary-le-Tower cannot of course just be concerned with itself. Why would God ever bless a christian church which is just concerned with itself? I have no doubt that God is calling this church to engage with the community around it, here in the centre of Ipswich; and the work in Tower House is really just the beginning of doing this. The project was in fact blessed with the promise of a large and generous legacy within just a month of the PCC deciding to press ahead and

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take on Tower House in early 2014. It's just that none of us knew about it until a couple of years ago. Now, because of this legacy, Tower House is not in any way a financial burden on the rest of St Mary-le-Tower. How amazing is that!

Choral ministry with young people, welcoming all to this house of prayer, engaging seriously with the wider community, being part of the regeneration of Ipswich town centre; all these are both serious opportunities for St Mary-le-Tower to be faithfully fruitful. They are also serious challenges, and the clear message of our Bible readings today, is that St Mary-le-Tower cannot possibly hope to be fruitful in these things without God; without abiding in the true vine, without paying serious attention to what the vine-grower is doing, without being united, without being serious about prayer, without loving one another, without bearing with one another, without generous love in so many ways, without everyone faithfully playing their full part.

Closing Meditation

Here again are some key verses from John 15. Remember these words are addressed to whole church communities, not so much to individuals. The challenge of course lies in what each member needs to do and to be, in order that the whole church community may be what God calls it to be. Each verse is set out separately below, and I invite you to spend some quiet times reflecting on each one. Jesus said to his disciples:

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.'

'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.'

'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.'

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.'

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