

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Saint Briavels and Hewelsfield, 2024

Acts 10.44-48
John 15.9-17

Alleluia! Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

There is something very lovely and almost hypnotic about readings from the second half of St John's gospel. But, if I'm honest, I also find quite a lot of these readings quite dense and complicated. It's worth remembering that from John chapter 13 all the way through the beginning of Chapter 18, what we get is really one long account of what Jesus said on the night of his arrest, on what we now think of as Maundy Thursday evening. So although we are hearing these words in the Easter season - we heard some of them last week and we'll hear more next week - these are words that Jesus is recorded as having said *before* his arrest, his trial and his crucifixion. And in fact the last time I read passages from John chapter 15 out aloud was in the dark in St Luke's Church in Tutshill as we watched after the communion service on Maundy Thursday evening. [I think David was there for some of those readings as well.]

So these are words from *before* those great events of Good Friday and Easter Day, which the church invites us to think about again now, in the sixth week of the great Easter season, and as we approach the feast of the Ascension, which of course is on Thursday.

And it's interesting that we have one quite simple straightforward reading from Acts today, and then, as I said, that

quite dense and complicated reading from St John's gospel. And the Acts reading helps us to make sense of the John.

Of course, the most memorable bit of the John reading, and probably the bit that we all might have latched on to as it went past, was the most famous line, "this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." And that bit gets repeated at the end of the reading: "these things I command you, that you love one another."

It is, of course, all about love. Again, bear in mind that Jesus is saying this to the disciples before he gets arrested, and condemned, and crucified. So he is, if you like, giving his disciples a bunch of stuff, a rucksack full of equipment, with which to negotiate a future with, even though they don't yet know what the future is going to be like. It's a bit like those television adventure quiz shows where the contestants get given a bunch of stuff that will be useful later on, but they don't know it yet. 'Ah, that's why I've been given an adjustable spanner, or a bundle of helium balloons, or whatever. I didn't know what those were for, until now...'

So let me just pick out three parts of the gospel reading that I think might be important for us to think about, as we try to negotiate our own Christian lives. Three little seeds, or three little nuggets, that Jesus gives to the disciples on that first Maundy Thursday evening that are going to be really important as events unfold; as the church begins to establish itself after the crucifixion and burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The first one is about joy. The second one is about friends. And the third one is about fruit. I haven't got a clever mnemonic to help you remember that I'm afraid, but if I'm boring you, you

can spend the rest of the sermon trying to all think one up. Joy. Friends. Fruit.

Jesus says, “these things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.” It’s the night before he is going to die, and Jesus wants to talk about joy. That might seem mad. Until we bear in mind that joy, as a theological concept, is not at all the same thing as happiness. Some Bible translations use the word happy here, which I think is a mistake. Happiness is transient. I can be happy driving to the shop to buy a chocolate doughnut, because I love chocolate doughnuts, then five minutes later I can be unhappy because the shop has sold out of chocolate doughnuts. Joy, Christian joy, is something much deeper. Much more profound. And actually, something that can sustain us even through periods of significant unhappiness. Bishop Michael Perham, our last Bishop, preached his very last sermon on Ash Wednesday 2017, just weeks before he died, and he knew he was dying, and he preached about joy. Joy in believing, joy in being a part of the body of Christ, is something we should seek to inhabit all times, regardless of the particular circumstances on a given day, or even a given hour. And Jesus tells his disciples that, just before they are about to see him arrested, convicted, and crucified. Happiness is not going to see them through the next 48 hours. But joy might. And the promise is that the sort of joy with which we will be gifted as Christian people is a joy that is complete, or, as another translation puts it, filled. We can be completely filled with that joy. It can define us. It can become who we are.

We then learn that the reason we can have that kind of joy is that we are not servants, but friends. Friends of Christ. Friends of God. And that is a completely different sort of relationship than a servant. It is almost thinking back to Adam and Eve - we may

walk with God in the cool of the garden. Or like Moses, who the Bible tells us talked with God ‘as one does with a friend’.

And then fruit. We are told that God chose us. Actually, we didn’t choose *him*. He chose us first, for the purposes of bearing fruit that will last. So there is work for us to do. There is an output at the end of this. And actually that output is that Christian joy. Which is the way in which we love one another. The way in which we love the world. The way in which we fulfil that command. We are going to love the world, love each other, better, if we are practising being filled with that deep joy.

So in a fairly complicated gospel reading: joy, friendship, and fruit. Those might be the key messages to take with you into the next week.

Then just finally a word about our first reading. This is the sixth Sunday of Easter. And so our readings are slowly turning us from looking behind us at the empty tomb towards the coming feast of Pentecost. Whitsunday. And so, we hear that as Peter preaches two things happen, which have always been the two things that mark out Christian people: the gift of the Holy Spirit, and baptism in water. And that is still how the church makes disciples today. We baptise new Christians in water, and we pray for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That’s what happened to each of you when you were Christened. Water to mark the passing from darkness into light, the washing away of the past. The Holy Spirit to fill us with that deep, lasting, transformative joy that will sustain us on the rest of the journey, remind us that we are Jesus’ friends, and begin to form, and grow, and mature in us the fruits of the Spirit - making us people of Pentecost. Christians fit for the future.

Alleluia! XP...