

## ***Sermon Preached by Revd Laura Selman on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019 at St Michael's***

### ***(Revd Ben Edwards Presiding)***

Galatians 5.1,13-25 Luke 9.51-end

“Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” – St Augustine

It is such an honour to be with you today, celebrating the ordinations of Ben, Claire and Phil.

It's such a joyful occasion that you'd be forgiven for thinking 'surely the people in charge of the lectionary – the bits of the bible that are allotted for reading each Sunday - will choose some really encouraging bits – the strength of the first church in Acts perhaps, or a healing miracle maybe, so that we're all reminded of how brilliant Jesus is.

But no.

Instead we get Jesus' idiot friends suggesting they call down some destruction from heaven on a Samaritan village – demonstrating yet again, just how much they haven't really got this whole Kingdom of God thing,

And then we have Jesus seemingly giving people a really hard time, and most definitely raising the bar when it comes to followership.

There are references to homelessness, exhortations to abandon family ties and responsibilities and to leave behind all you know.

Phew!

So I thought, I know! I'll give each of these brand new priests a gift to lighten the mood!

So here you go...

[distribute boxes]

[open boxes]

In the words of Winnie-the-Pooh 'No one can be uncheered with a balloon'.

At the moment your balloons are weighted down.

[distribute scissors]

Please could you cut the balloon from its weight and tie it to your wrist instead.

Thank you.

Now please hold your balloon in your hands.

For the next few minutes this balloon represents the LOVE of GOD.

And you have just taken possession of, and been possessed by, this love.

Beautiful, isn't it?

And initially, perhaps, you think – I'll never want to look on anything else.

How wonderfully light a burden.

Such amazing grace...

Etc. etc.

But over time, as life goes on, you begin to hold on to other stuff too.

Perhaps you find yourself earning more Money.

Or worrying about money.

Maybe it's mortgage repayments.

Or Health worries.

Family Commitments.

Relationships....

The list goes on.

And it's not long before you find yourself holding onto all manner of thing.

And maybe chasing after a few things too.

Status, power, wealth, security, comfort... or something else entirely.

And you still have God's LOVE with you, of course you do.

That is, after all, the nature of an ever-faithful, unchanging Almighty.

But it's an awful lot easier to keep that love at a distance.

[please let go of your balloons]

To wear it round your wrist but not have it take up too much room, front and centre.

And yet what Jesus is saying this morning to his followers is this:

This love.

This love that heals and restores.

This love that is so beautiful and mysterious.

This love that beckons you from death to life every day.

This love that whispers into the darkest places, the parts of you that you keep hidden away.

This love that unsettles.

This love that aches at injustice.

This love that is full of truth and forgiveness and hope.

This one thing:

Is the first and only thing you need hold fast to.

Set your course by it.

Let everything else slip through your fingers, but not God's glorious, gracious LOVE.

Follow after God and EVERYTHING else will follow from that.

[please hold your balloon close again]

Now that's not just true for Phil, Ben and Claire.

That's what Christ says to ALL of us this morning.

Be set free.

Let your first task be being loved and your second loving in response.

But for our newly-minted priests here, part of what their ordination yesterday did was mark them out as people who have said;

'By the help of God, I will'.

I will try and stay close to God and hold fast to God's love and grace and forgiveness.

(Even if it means sitting in church holding a helium balloon as a sort of over-extended metaphor for God's love at the request of a woman I hardly know).

Ordination doesn't necessarily make them any better at it than the rest of us.

But it marks them out as people who have said 'yes'.

I will try to follow God and be changed by God.

And I am prepared to be seen whilst I do it.

So you, as their community, have this wonderful privilege of seeing Claire and Ben and Phil, and sharing with them.

Of rejoicing with them and receiving the hospitality and gifts of their ministries.

But you also have the responsibility of supporting them on the days when holding onto the balloon feeling more like trying to carry a lead weight.

When, as Jesus, having set his face to Jerusalem knew only too well, being loved by God feels a little like being stripped of all you know and hold dear.

And this is the point at which the balloon metaphor really falls apart.

Because of course Jesus doesn't give his friends a quirky little gift to remember him by.

He gives them His very self.

His body and blood.

It is sacrifice and feast all at once.

So as Ben prepares that table, inviting us to gather round and be fed, may we receive with open hands and hearts determined to hold fast to the love of God.

May we eat and drink that love until we overflow with it,

And may we go out into the world and offer that love to everyone and everything,

AMEN.

## ***Sermon Preached by Revd Margaret Whittaker on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019 at St Luke's***

### ***(Revd Claire Kiddy Presiding)***

Galatians 6:1-16 Luke 10:1-20

There are times when we look at the readings for Sunday - and we think "What on earth shall I focus on - there is so much here". Today is such a day. I could go in a number of directions – much like the seventy whom Jesus sent out as lambs among wolves – but I began to think about Claire and what I had learned about her as we spent time together in "B" Group when she was training. We call them A-F Groups because they are numbered A-F - we are nothing if not creative sometimes at ERMCC!

And what I had observed of Claire was a calm, gentle, confidence - now I know that she probably did not always feel like that - she was probably shaking inside - she may be doing that today - for all we know. But what was revealed to those of us whose role is to observe, listen and guide, was this quiet grit that is the hallmark of a true leader. Claire did not always speak - but when she did it was to say something worth hearing - and always something that took us forward in our thinking - you may have discovered that here for yourselves.

But I think Claire was at her very best, the time when she revealed to us her true heart of compassion, was at Summer School in 2017, when we were exploring Models of Education and the different ways people learn and how we help people to learn. The practical exercise, which was for assessment, involved the students in using a device for teaching and learning with which they were familiar, and the rest of the group would be their class.

This required a number of skills, quite apart from knowing your field, you also had to use your leadership to persuade the rest of the group to engage in an activity in which they may have no knowledge, understanding or skill.

Claire stepped out on a limb and decided that she would use her knowledge of the elderly with Alzheimer's and Dementia to lead a nature class that would encourage connection with memory through body sensation and awareness.

She had gathered many leaves, cones, feathers, wildflowers and the like from the surrounding area and invited her peers to become elderly people in a care home.

She was quietly masterful.

Her group rallied to her side and played the elderly to perfection, while Claire encouraged participation with gentleness and compassion, leading her group to articulate their experience of the artefacts and to respond exactly as that population of people would respond. It was a delight to watch and I remember feeling quite emotional as I was watching and trying to assess this work that was bringing connection at a very deep level. I was very tempted to join in.

What was so compelling about what Claire did were two particular things.

First of all, there was a courage. In asking her peers to take on the mantle of elderly people who had lost touch with reality was a big ask. And then to ask them to engage with her as she encouraged connection with nature, with themselves and with their past, through familiar touch and smell. And they rallied to her side entering the spirit of what Claire was doing with gusto - engaging their own imaginations - and possibly even some painful places as some had perhaps lost parents or grandparents to this disabling condition.

Secondly it was the empathic and gentle way that Claire used her props, - leaves, flowers and feathers - to draw out memory and connection for her group.

This spirit is the hallmark of one who has focused her life on Jesus. It is not the work of a moment, it is often forged in pain and suffering and living life on life's terms.

And Jesus is no milk and water Saviour - it was not weakness and woolliness that took Jesus to the cross. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild had a core of steel which had its roots, not in the ego, as it often is with us, but in the trust He had in the Father, which enabled him to work with humility and the kind of strength that comes only from the Holy Spirit. That kind of love is called Tough Love, love which has its motivation from wanting the best for the Other, no matter the cost to ourselves and which requires speaking truth to power - not always easy.

Paul's letter to the Galatians refers to a Spirit of Gentleness - he is referring to this in the context of restoring a transgressor. And that gentle spirit is a prime characteristic of those who follow a pathway of love. Love with a capital "L". Love with a capital "L" is not a milk and water, sentimental kind of love, but the tough love that is not afraid to step out into the unknown, trusting in God.

It has to be underscored by a strong sense of justice and strength - for gentleness to be effective in restoring transgressors or hurting people, it has to be fueled by justice and strength.

When Jesus sent out the seventy, he said he was sending them out as lambs among wolves. Like Him, they had to be unaggressive. Lambs are gentle creatures – but in order to survive the harsh conditions that many are born into in this country – think Welsh Mountains, Scottish Highlands, Yorkshire Dales - there must be an underlying strength – a hardiness – a zest for life - and the grit that survival requires.

The seventy came back rejoicing that "even the demons submitted to them". Touch of ego, you see. (When you see the word "Flesh" in Scripture it is often helpful to think "Ego").

And Jesus was quick to correct them, pointing out that the authority they had was from him, since He had been there at the beginning and knew the enemy, so only He knew how to overpower it. And that their rejoicing was to be in the fact that they had answered the call to service and would be rewarded for it.

We see gentleness at its most inspiring when we see Jesus before the scribes and Pharisees and later before Pilate. The Scriptures tell us the "as a lamb stands before its shearer, Jesus was silent before his accusers". But it wasn't the silence of fear, it was the silence of obedience.

Obedience is a funny word – its root leads us to understand that it really means to Listen and to Pay Attention. Obviously listening and paying attention usually leads to action. But when we talk about obedience in religious terms, we are talking about listening – listening to God, to our neighbour and to ourselves – connecting with the Truth that leads to eternal life.

The seventy still hadn't figured that – they were too young in the faith – they were excited, they were on a high – demons submitted to them.

However you interpret the word demon it refers to something that belongs to the shadows – to the darkness. The seventy were bringing the light of Christ into the lives of those to whom they ministered, and the light cast out the darkness.

Claire does this too – she brings a light of love and gentleness into dark places. I saw that the day that she shared her expertise with us as she ministered to those who were playing the part of those whose light of life has largely extinguished – and whose life had lost its sparkle. By inviting people to share in this experience she also shed light for her fellow students on the darkness that people with dementia have.

This is the ministry of Love, gentleness and strength that we are all called to pursue, in our various contexts and situations. No one is exempt – as we each have entered relationship with Christ, so we have entered into a calling. No one is in this building this morning because we forced to be – in some way we have been called and have answered that call. And there is a benefit for each of us in our presence here today – but that gives us a responsibility. No benefits without responsibility. Sounds like a government slogan! But there is a truth there – we benefit from our presence in Church, therefore we have a responsibility to share some of that benefit from Monday to Saturday.

The call will be different for each of us – and we may not even see it as anything very much – but the mortar that holds the bricks together is as important as the bricks – and each brick is unique. It will have responded to the fire of the kiln in its own way. But in the Church of Christ each brick, each layer of mortar has its purpose.

The journey of life is to find that purpose and carry it out, in Love, Gentleness and Strength.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

## ***Sermon Preached by Faith Darch on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019 at St Michael's***

***(Revd Phil Cudmore Presiding)***

Genesis 29:1-20; Mark 6:7-29

I feel very honoured that Philip asked me to preach at this service. Being a reader is a role that he has filled for many years and I followed him into it. Now we hope that Doreen too will take up the mantle he's laid down as he goes into ordained ministry.

When I agreed to preach, Rich asked me which readings I would like and my mind promptly went blank. So I said, why not have the readings set for the second service of the day? They are rarely heard, as we don't often have an evening service. Then I looked at them and thought 'Oh help!' I wondered whether I could imitate Phil and tell you all about the saint whose feast day it might be – some obscure person about whom I could discover some little known and fascinating facts.

Today is the feast day of St Thomas a Becket. He is not obscure. Briefly, Becket, the son of a merchant and a devout mother, had begun his career as a clerk (I think that means he was ordained deacon) and accountant. He served the archbishop of Canterbury, Theobald, as archdeacon of Canterbury, and was recommended by him to King Henry 11 to be chancellor. He conducted himself in this role with energy and brilliance and became the friend and companion of the king, enjoying hunting, a luxurious lifestyle and supporting Henry in his attempts to exercise more authority over the church. When Henry made Thomas archbishop of Canterbury, he assumed that Thomas would continue to support him in increasing the power of the state over the church. But, once Becket was in post, he resigned his chancellorship, took his position seriously and championed the church against the power of the king. Eventually the breach between the 2 men led to the murder of Thomas in the cathedral.

Is there any parallel with our Philip? He was employed in the tax office, where I'm sure he worked diligently for the state. He also held a church position at the same time as a Reader; now that he has retired from paid employment, he has given himself more fully to the service of the church, in study and time. Phil's life has not fallen into 2 contrasting halves, with a complete split between them. Becket's life began with a lavish lifestyle, desiring social position, and with much show but changed to austerity and a hair shirt. He began with devotion to the secular and ended with devotion to the sacred. Yet surely there should not be a division between secular and sacred. Phil combined secular work to earn his living with the preaching role of reader and has developed gradually into increasing service to others through ministry in the church and becoming deacon and priest. Life should not be split into 2 halves set against each other, so that one's values change according to one's role. Even a secular career can be underpinned by Christ's values of honesty and service and concern for the welfare of others. And, I believe, in Jesus' eyes, there is no division between sacred and secular, for all life is hallowed by God's presence, everywhere and always.

The reading from Mark's gospel starts with "Then Jesus went round teaching from village to village" (v7). That was his prime purpose: to tell people about the kingdom of God and of God's love for people. And it was his commission to his disciples: "go and make disciples ... teaching them" (Matt 28:19, 20). His healing miracles were almost incidental – an overflowing of and demonstration of the love and compassion of God which he'd come to show to humankind. Reader ministry is, first and foremost, a teaching and preaching ministry though it should, quite naturally, overflow into areas of pastoral care and service. In Phil's case the pastoral care will have been shown in funeral visits, his service in the blood bike role. God likes to use people's natural talents and passions (in Phil's case for motorbikes) in serving him through serving others.

In Mark's gospel passage, it's clear that our service in Jesus' name is simple: firstly to preach that people should repent, then to drive out demons and heal the sick. Simple, but a tall order! We may think that the NHS takes care of most cases of sickness, especially physical ailments. We may have doubts about demon

possession. But there are plenty of demons of loneliness and despair and self-doubt; there is great need for kindness and support and love that we are all called upon to give – and to receive from others in our turn. For it's a mistake for us, whether in public ministry or simply as declared Christians, to present ourselves as somehow being above the need of others' ministry. We all need to be ministered to at some time in our lives, and to allow others to become ministers to us. Even someone as strong in the Lord as Paul suffered and needed the friendship of Titus to help him through a tough time: "we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (2 Cor 7:5,6).

One thing that struck me about Jesus' sending of his followers is how little they were to take – or plan. There is not a massive logistical structure behind them; there's no great financial or material backing. The disciples must first learn to rely upon God for guidance in where they go and what they say – and for their daily needs. That's not to say we should do no planning and no preparation for our service and outreach, nor that there's no need for financial resources. But it reminds us of the simplicity of our task: to proclaim God's love and to demonstrate it by showing it. We need to beware of over-complicating our message and of relying on our planning to the exclusion of God's Holy Spirit.

I don't think that's it's just a coincidence that the story of the end of John the Baptist follows Jesus' sending his disciples into the world. There are times when our loyalty to God may lead inevitably to conflict with the earthly powers that be. Imagine living in Hitler's Germany or in North Korea today. I have to say that both Thomas a Becket and John the Baptist showed intransigence and didn't mince their words before kings. And when you confront absolute monarchs, that confrontation is likely to lead to a sticky end. St Paul, in Acts chapters 24 and 26, shows he can speak to governors and kings to proclaim the good news of Jesus without putting their backs up. Most of us aren't called to speak to those in authority. Speaking truth to power will probably cause offence, but it doesn't have to be done offensively. Indeed, as "a soft answer turneth away wrath" (Prov 15:1), won't we win over more people to Jesus by speaking gently and with respect? I think Phil is not known for speaking in a way that creates a barrier to the gospel by putting their backs up!

Finally I come to the reading from Genesis. What on earth can the story of Jacob going to Haran to find a wife from his own people have to say about ministry today?

The story tells us that Jacob went to Laban and starts to work for him and, when asked what he wants in payment, asks for Rachel as his wife. Why? Because he has fallen in love with her. He's going to be working for Laban, not because he's specially fond of him, though he's family. In fact, Laban is not the best of bosses. And he doesn't get Rachel immediately. He has to wait 7 years. Presumably he saw her every day and got to know her better throughout those years of service. "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Gen 29:20).

When people offer themselves for ministry – whether as reader or priest or any other role, paid or unpaid – one motive makes the duty seem light and the task a joy. That motive is love. And that's the only motive God wants us to have. We may serve the church, or serve in the church, however imperfect the church may be, as Jacob served Laban, with all his faults. But his love was for Rachel. We serve – all of us, I hope – because we love Jesus. As we serve in his company and in his presence, we have the opportunity to get to know him better and so to love him more.

I'm sure that Philip loves Jesus and that is his reason for wishing to know him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day by day. That should be our primary motive too for being here. If it is, then the years of service will seem 'but a few days' and will bring us joy.

Amen.