

## 9<sup>th</sup> May 6 pm Living and Sharing in God's Love

Led by Emma Latham. Talk by Rob Latham, Readings by Emma Latham and Stephen Prestwich, Prayers by Felicity Hawke

*This transcript is only of the readings and the talk*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: 1 John 5:1-8 [NIVUK 1984] Faith in the Incarnate Son of God**

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. 2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. 3 In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

6 This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. 7 For there are three that testify: 8 The Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: John 15:9-17**

9 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: love each other.'

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

## **Sermon**

[Rob:]

So, good evening again and let us pray.

Father, may I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I had an interesting challenge today, because I am preaching for the second time. This morning I was at Meriden church, St. Lawrence, and I was taking the service there and of course I preached using what I thought would be the same readings. However, there was one small difference between what we used at Meriden this morning and what we've used this evening. And that is, technically, we are supposed to use, during the season of Easter, the readings from the Acts of the Apostles as our prime epistle, rather than the one we've used this evening, from the first letter of John. It doesn't matter greatly, but I have to say that this morning's sermon was primarily sort of leading off from what I read in the Acts of the Apostles. And so trying to switch my thoughts back to the first letter of John, chapter five, and to the gospel was probably [not] the

easiest of things. I mean I faced a number of tricky things which I hope I've overcome, you'll have to judge that for yourselves.

The first is that, in some senses, the first reading, we could take the gospel as kind of taking us back to Passiontide: those famous words of Jesus that no-one has love greater than this, that he lay down his life for his friends, immediately take us back to Jesus and His sacrifice on the Cross, and you don't have to take my word for it because that's the opinion of the congregation at Meriden this morning as well.

But in the Easter season, I can sometimes think that we actually get too much hung up with painting pictures around the Cross, and maybe thinking about our salvation when we should be more clearly proclaiming the Resurrection, because it is the Easter season, and in the Easter season we cry, "Hallelujah! Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!" And that should be our principal focus. But it does lead me to question, though, why is it that we have to have these Acts of the Apostles readings? It's been lovely, of course, though they've now come to the end, to follow Andrew and Michelle and Denise on Wednesday, as they've shared and unpacked the whole of the Acts of the Apostles for us in successive weeks. But the reason why we have them as Easter readings, I think is very simple. And I'm sure this was mentioned in the Bible study programmes that we've had. And that is simply that Acts of the Apostles is not just the story of the early church, it can also be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers as the church is built, but it also it gives us a very clear picture of what the Resurrection life that is to be lived by us believers, what it actually contains, and that actually it's full of examples of people filled with the Spirit, who are living very clearly the Resurrection life of Jesus, right there in the midst of the people which they are connecting with. And therefore, it's very clear evidence, beyond the empty tomb, beyond the appearances of Jesus, it's very clear evidence that the Resurrection is real, that Jesus is alive, because His people clearly behave in a manner that they would not, if it were not true. And for that reason, the Acts of the Apostles is one of my favourite books in the Bible, because it has this constancy: an inspiration for us all to live a life that reflects the life of Jesus.

So, in a sense, I'd like, with that background, to turn briefly to the gospel again, and to 1 John 5, and actually view it, not as though we were thinking about the readings in the light of the Cross, and Jesus laying down His life, but perhaps rather more of what the implications are, if we are Christians like the people, like the apostles in the Acts of the Apostles, actually seeking to live out the life of Jesus here and now today.

Well we can't go very far, can we, in the gospel, without really anchoring it in what one of the verses I've already spoken about. The key passage is clearly those verses<sup>1</sup> which says this:

**12** "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

I think it's very important to realise that the context, the immediate context of these words is the teaching that Jesus gives when he says that His Father is the gardener, and He is the vinedresser. And that He is the Living vine, and that, to abide in God, and to live our Christian life, we must abide in Him, so that in His love and tender care, He can ensure that we will live lives as fruitful as it possibly could be. That means not only subjecting ourselves to the pruning that comes when the dead issues and the lifeless parts of us have to be pruned away, but also to that pruning when we think we're abounding in goodness and abounding in rewards and blessings from the Lord, and actually even some of that is cut away, because Jesus says it's about us bearing even more fruit.

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1 John 15:12-13 [NRSV]

I remember once in a service a long while ago, preaching with my father present. And I turned to him and asked for him to corroborate something that I was saying. It was about pruning. And I said to my dad, "Isn't it true that actually if you prune plants, roses, whatever they might be, you do it as hard as you possibly can?" thinking that my dad would say, "Oh, yes, that's fine." Well he's much more of a gardener than I am, and his response was, "Well, it depends what you're pruning." Well, in this instance, of course, we're talking about us being pruned, as part of our continual life with Jesus, and in the kingdom of God.

You see, it's very easy to turn the biblical passages into lovey-dovey examples of how we can trust and believe in the God of love, who comes and loves us exactly as we are. And that is entirely true. I'm not saying it's wrong, but it's not sufficient, I believe, just to leave it there. Yes, of course, God loves us as we are. That's the reason why He has reached out to us, and He seeks to bless us. But you see, there is also those telling words which I've heard from a guy called Bob Mumford – you may have heard me mentioning it before – but I believe also I've been spoken at various times by the likes of Billy Graham. And that is simply that yes, of course God loves us as we are. But He loves us far too much to leave us just as we are. He wants to see us changing and growing and developing and bearing fruit. And the key thing is, it is not just about delighting in the love of Jesus, of the Father, of the Spirit, for us, as though we're going to have a mighty love-in and have our tummy tickled, but actually us then living out that love ourselves, and loving Jesus in return, in the way that is right and proper for Him to be worshipped and honoured in our love. In the same way, this is exemplified, very clearly, by the way in which we love each other.

Loving each other is an example of what sort of discipleship that we enter into. Jesus says<sup>2</sup>, "When you love one another, then you will be known to be My disciples." Elsewhere, He says<sup>3</sup>, "If you love one another, the world will believe." So loving each other is a way also of loving and honouring God, and is also a way in which we take into ourselves a life of the Spirit, and live out the Resurrection life in our lives today, that our lives are bound in love, that we offer love, we bless love, and we thank equally those who love us and honour us with their love – as long as it's the love that Jesus would have shown. It has to be, of course, the greatest quality of love, not loving out of seeking gain or manipulation or desire for something from anybody, like cupboard love, but actually loving and directing our footsteps, in a way that reflects the mighty love of Jesus, and how He has enabled us to give everything to God.

You see, we could also reflect in the same sort of way about the way in which Jesus loves us, offering Himself upon the Cross. But you see Jesus also turns to us and says to us<sup>4</sup>, "If anybody wants to be My disciple let him or her deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me." Francis Frangipane, an American evangelist, says the Cross is an instrument of torture that's designed to kill us. And that God and Satan want us dead for different reasons. Satan, to have us done away with and be lost forever; Jesus, so that He can change and separate us, and change us into the people He wants us to be, to make us better. It follows, clearly, that we are not being asked in that sense, to actually die upon a cross ourselves, though of course, some people are called to have their faith tested in that sort of way, but there was a primary call for us in giving our lives over and taking our own cross up is to live in love and to be the people God wants us to be, to live it out, to live the life of all that is right and good and true.

And in many senses we turn then to the epistle. We have the similar sorts of things: the way in which we show that we love God is to love each other and to

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2 John 13:35, loose translation

3 e.g. John 17:21, "May they be one, so that the world will believe..."

4 Mark 8:34, Matthew 16:24 or Luke 9:23, loose translation

love God. The way we show that is to delight and to fulfil His commandments<sup>5</sup>, "To love one another as I have loved you." And so it goes on: the same message is repeated in the epistle. But there is a further step, to take that as well. As we read this evening, I asked Emma to read two further verses from where we were originally supposed to finish. And that was so that we could actually get a very clear perspective on something which I didn't think was quite clear enough if we would have ended at verse 6, because the writer of John's letter tells us that there are three witnesses to God's love and God's power. Let us just track those into how Jesus testified himself. The three witnesses are the blood, the water and the Spirit, though I fear I've probably not given those in the right order. I think it's Spirit, water, blood. Thank you, Emma, who is just off sight, for helping me with that.

- In the life of Jesus, we see clearly Jesus Himself dedicated Himself and offered Himself in the waters of baptism, when He went to John the Baptist, at the River Jordan.
- He is baptised, but then immediately filled with the Holy Spirit. And indeed, He lives the exemplary life of the Spirit from there on in. He is a man completely filled with the Holy Spirit, so the Holy Spirit bears testimony to Jesus as well.
- And finally, Jesus comes to the Cross and to His death, and therefore the blood of Jesus bears testimony to His work.

So we have the three witnesses of baptism, Cross, and the Holy Spirit.

So how do we fit that into this theme of living the life of the Spirit, living the life of the Resurrection, that I've been talking about? So let's just backtrack a little bit. There's a story in Mark's gospel<sup>6</sup>, which is repeated in Matthew's gospel<sup>7</sup>, which tells how in one instance, the disciples James and John come to Jesus and ask to sit in glory, one at the left, one at the right hand of Jesus, when he reigns in His Kingdom. The Matthean version has their mother asking that question for them, which I think is a real, but humorous piece, because isn't it just what a mother would want to do for their children: get them into the right places, the right influence and shape them up, but it's the Mark version I want to concentrate on. Because when Jesus has this request, He turns to James and John and He asks them this question: "Are you able to be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with? Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink?" There's no answer to that. Because you see, to sit at the right- and the left-hand side, as Jesus explains, that Jesus in His Kingdom is not for Jesus to allocate. And it particularly rings true in Mark's gospel when the stories of the Resurrection are a little bit more enshrouded with fear and wonder and worry of exactly what is going on. Because the true place where Jesus reigns in glory is from the Cross. And on the Cross, Jesus has on his left-hand side and right-hand side, two thieves, one of whom, Luke tells us, is a penitent one, and will share with Jesus in Paradise on the very day that Jesus Himself dies.

But going back to James and John, and their now rather uncertain response to what Jesus says, perhaps they perceive something of what Jesus has committed Himself to. So Jesus it is who continues. He says to James and John, "You will be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised; you will drink the cup that I drink." This is the life of God's Holy Spirit that will produce this in James and John. It will produce it in a similar way in each of the other 11 disciples who remain true to Jesus, and indeed to the new twelfth disciple Matthias. We read about it in the Acts of the Apostles, of how those disciples, and many, many other people, begin to follow Jesus in the power of the Spirit and live the Resurrection life.

But you see, that Resurrection life is not all froth and joy and bubble and happiness, and being content with everything because you have the joys of the

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5 John 13:34, loose translation

6 Mark 10:35-45

7 Matthew 20:20-28

world on your hand. There is that other dimension of laying down lives for the Gospel and for the Kingdom, of living our lives for Him who has called us into life. So as, even in the lives of James and John and the other disciples, those three witnesses, the water, our baptism, their baptism, their own giving of life, though it may not be a cross (although apart from John all the disciples, all the apostles died a martyr's death) and the power of the Spirit, work within us. Those three witnesses are the witnesses that work, not only in Jesus, but in each of the apostles' lives. And Jesus calls us to allow those witnesses to bear testimony to our willingness to live the Resurrection life, that as we live that Resurrection life today, and engage with the Gospel calling, laying down ourselves to be servants of the King, it is in that way that we find that when our mortal death comes, that we don't have to ask for a place in Heaven, because actually, by living the Resurrection life here and now, we will actually have already entered Heaven, and we will have our reward according to those witnesses that have testified to us, and we shall be with the Lord forever.

So let us bind ourselves, gird ourselves and move forward. Let us desire to live today in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us be witnesses to God's Kingdom and the work of Jesus, and let us in our lives demonstrate that those three witnesses, water, the blood and the Spirit, are true witnesses not just to Jesus and His work, but to our work also.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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