

Transcription of the sermon preached by Rt Rev Dr Michael Volland, Bishop of Birmingham,  
at the Centenary Eucharist at St John the Divine, Tidbury Green.

25<sup>th</sup> May 2025

John 15: 1-17

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, it really is wonderful to be with you to celebrate 100 years of the establishment of this church, Saint John the Divine. And as we've already heard, it's not 100 years today, it was actually on Friday, so we're 100 years and 2 days – the building was actually consecrated on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1925. And there is a plaque on the other side of this beam. You can see it if you're inside the building. If you're outside, come and have a look at it afterwards. It's good to be able to see that and make contact with the past. Apart from a brief pause in the 1980s, this has been a place of worship for 100 years – what an amazing and encouraging thing. I was going to ask I wonder who's been here the longest, but I won't do that! We've heard some stories from people who have remembered what this place was like, has been like, and what it means to them.

And that's rich thing to hear and that's because actually we're just in simple wooden building. And it's got a beauty of its own, but the thing is the *people*, and the fact that God is here and that God has brought this place into being. And that's what we respond to, that's what's important. But the building *is* beautiful. I like its simplicity. It's a wonderful space to meet in.

It's important to mark anniversaries. We all know this. They are a gift to us. They help us remember the faithfulness of God. They give us a chance to think about everything that's happened in the time that's passed between whenever something began, and now. To give thanks for everything that's been good - there's been much that's been good here. And perhaps to reflect on, if we're *really* honest, some of the things that have been difficult or challenging, because inevitably that's the case. When human beings are together, some things are wonderful and good, some things are hard and challenging. Anniversaries give us a moment to think, "Wow, *that* was really important and special and that gave me great joy

in life. And actually, *that* which I remember wasn't so good", and we can learn from that and move on beyond it. So, anniversaries are important for all those reasons.

And they do give us a chance to thank God for God's faithfulness. This church would not be here were it not for the faithfulness of God. Of course the hard work of all the people have put in, of course, but also the deep work of God in the lives of those people who have made up the congregation who have served here, who have done what they have done because of their love for God. So today we give thanks to God also for this wonderful place.

And we give thanks to those who have the vision for this place and this chap is mentioned - the Reverend S Pridmore Riley, Vicar of this parish. And I love what it says here, "Erected by those who worshipped in this place under his guidance and friendship." So he was here from 1922 to 41. Nobody here remembers him, right? He would have been part of the vision for this place being put up. But there will have been others too of course, so we give thanks to all those now unknown to us who had the vision to bring this place into being; and we give thanks for all those who over the decades whose prayers and hard work has sustained the life of this place, and maintained the building. And we heard a little bit earlier about that - there's lot of work goes into us sitting in this wonderful clean, well maintained space. So thank you for all that you have done to ensure this place is in good order, as you have witnessed to the good news about Jesus. And there's so much to give thanks for.

And our reading from John which we just heard beautifully read gives us more to be thankful for. In it we heard this - Jesus is telling his disciples, so just a little reminder of what we heard. "Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing". He also said, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love." And then he said this, "This is my commandment, that you love each other."

That's quite straightforward.

In fact, it's not straightforward at all, is it, actually to love each other, but at least it's a simple thing for us to hang on to.

He also says this, and this is a beautiful thing. This is Jesus speaking, "I have called you friends." What wonderful thing to hear from the Lord Jesus. "I have called you friends." And

he said, "You didn't choose me, I chose you." Well, that's incredibly encouraging too, isn't it? "You didn't choose me," says Jesus, "I chose you."

And the last thing I wanted to pull out of that gospel reading is this. "And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

So Jesus calls us friends. He chose us. He appointed us to bear fruit. If we abide in him we will bear fruit. To abide in him we must obey his commandments, and his commandment is that we love each other.

So that's quite a nice little kind of nutshell of information.

So as we thank God for the past 100 years of the life and witness of this wonderful place, and as together you look forward to the next 100, these are helpful and encouraging words. These words of Jesus are at the heart of this vibrant community, full of life and joy.

I just want to think very briefly about each of those things that Jesus said.

He calls us friends. Some of you may know the song, "What a friend we have in Jesus"? It's a beautiful song. My favourite version is by Aretha Franklin. I challenge you not to weep if you listen to Aretha Franklin sing that song.

"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear".

Absolutely beautiful.

Jesus calls us friends, that's the point. It's such a powerful beautiful reminder that as we put our trust in Jesus, he is there to bear us, to bear our sins and griefs, to take all our troubles on himself, to give us strength for the journey. And this community has witnessed to that for 100 years - that's why it's still here, because it's got something worth saying, and for people to listen to. Something worth listening to, because at the heart of it is that Jesus calls us friends. How beautiful. So may this place in 100 years from now still be a place where people come here and they find Jesus calls them friends, because that's a great gift to this community.

Next, Jesus tells us we didn't choose him, he chose us. What an encouragement. The Son of God, through whom everything came into existence, chose you. What a beautiful thing to take home with you today - to know he chose you. He doesn't make mistakes. He chose you. He chose me. He chose us. He knows us, he loves us, he cares for us. He chose us. May Saint

John the Divine in 100 years from now be a place where people who come in know that Jesus chose them too.

Jesus appointed us to bear lasting fruit. He's given us work to do - he wants us to be fruitful. And in the Bible were told the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. There are nine. So those are the things that tell us what God is like - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. That's the fruit of the Spirit. We see that in the lives of those who walk closely with Jesus. May St John the Divine be a place where people grow in the fruit of the Spirit. A place full of those who are full of love, joy and peace and patience and kindness. Those things are impossible in our own strength. God gives us those things. They are the fruit of the Spirit working in us – we can't muster them up. None of us can muster up love, or patience, or kindness, but God gives them to us, and we see them in others. So may this, in 100 years from now, be full of people who are full of the fruit of the Spirit.

And Jesus tells us that if we abide in him we will bear fruit. May this be a place in 100 years from now where those who are found sitting where you are, are abiding in Jesus. That is, to live with him. To not rush away, to not be always distracted, but to have our attention focussed on Jesus. To abide, to live, to dwell with Jesus. So that when people visit, if they just woke up one morning in one of the houses round here and thought "I'll go to church today," they would come in here and find people who are focused on Jesus. Who are abiding in Jesus.

And Jesus said to abide in him, said "you'll abide in me if you obey my commandments, and my command is this. Love each other." And like I said before, that's easy to hear – we all go, "Yes, that's good!" But it's tough to do. Love one another. Because he says, "Love one another *as I have loved you.*"

How did Jesus love those around him? He gave his life for them. He washed their feet. He served them with great humility. That's how Jesus loved them. That's how Jesus loves us. And he says, "Love one another as I have loved you." When we actually begin to think about it, that's a very tall order. I'm not capable of that. I'm sure you're not. We have to ask God, "Please – all, actually I want to think about is what's good for me. Am I alright?"

Actually, if I'm really honest, it is God who gives us the ability to love each other. To think beyond ourselves. To put away fear, and to say, "I love you, I'll serve you, I'll put you first." That's impossible in our own strength. And when you see someone doing it, it's because God is at work in their life., and the love that comes from God is working through them, and makes it possible for them to put themselves aside (not like a doormat of course, God loves you, you should love yourself), but to love other, to serve others. To look for the best in others. That comes from God. When you see it in action, you'll see that God is there, in that place.

So as we do that, as we abide in Jesus, his love will fill us, we will be able to love one another, and that transforms communities.

So as we give thanks for 100 years of this place witnessing to the good news of Jesus, and as we look forward to the next 100 years. May this be a place where people may know they are friends with Jesus; that he has chosen them, they didn't choose him; where you are abiding in Jesus, filled with his love that flows out into love for one another and love for this community.

If you do that – as you do that – there is great hope, because in a world of uncertainty, in a world of great challenge and pressure and stress, people are looking for hope, looking for love. Looking, wondering, is there any hope for the future? And in Jesus Christ there is. Because he is the one who has given himself for us, fills us with love, enables us to serve others. There is hope for our world in that. There is hope for our world in that. And you can make a difference with your part, here at St John, in this community, in this place. Because God loves this place, and will work through you as you seek to serve one another, and serve it. You will be very fruitful.

So, may God be with you. May God bless you for the next 100 years, and for all of that, we'll give God all the glory. Praise the Lord for today and for all that we are celebrating. Amen.