

Easter 6 – YrB John 15.9-17, Acts 10.44-48 (5 May 2024)

You did not choose me but I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

In a recent interview with Canadian singer Michael Bublé, he opened up about the shock of finding out that his three year old son had liver cancer. Talking with host Steven Bartlett, he recalls: [the diagnosis] “was a sledgehammer to my reality”. “It pulled the curtain from over my eyes”. The news shook and shifted his priorities, as to what really mattered.

Jesus has just told the disciples that he is soon to die and will be leaving them – and they too are shaken up and revisiting their priorities. As we draw near to the Ascension – they will be jolted once more when Jesus tells them that he is returning to the Father – leaving them again. In their uncertainties, Jesus recalls them to their priority – in relationship to him. **You did not choose me, but I chose you.**

A humbling and reassuring word for Jesus’ anxious disciples.

Powerful words for us today when things are shaken up in our personal lives, or in the wider global context of unrest and climate fragility. When our lives seem fruitless or pointless, Jesus draws us back to our creator God who reached out to us first, inviting us into a relationship of love. “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

What does God choose us for? Neither for special privileges and power, nor because we are particularly gifted, successful, or likely!

God chooses us for friendship.

Jesus said to his disciples: I chose you to be my friends. “I do not call you servants or slaves any longer, but I have called you friends.”

Icon of friendship (SLIDE)

I remember being very struck by the impact of a friendship between two people. “Paul” was dealing with quite serious mental health challenges and was in and out of psychiatric units. “Claire” was in a mess financially and unable to sort out her debts.

As they got to know each other, and they shared their struggles – Claire wasn't phased by Paul's unstable mental health. Meanwhile, Paul had a good head for admin, dealing with bureaucracy and chasing up Claire's bills and debts.

As they began to trust each other with their weaknesses, and to help each other in life's challenges, they both began to blossom and become more truly themselves.

Jesus called his disciples – friends – with whom he shared all that had come from his Father in heaven. Jesus calls us friends – a friendship in which we can honestly share our weaknesses and tenderness, along with our strengths and hopes. This is a friend we can trust, who will walk with us and promises to never leave us or forsake us.

In the courts of Roman emperors and eastern kings, there would be a select group who were called the friends of the king or the emperor – who had access to their leader and vice versa – at any time of day or night – an intimate connection.

Christ came to restore us to friendship with God, to a renewed intimacy with our Creator, someone we have access to day and night.

Rowan Williams writes: **(see icon)**

“He has decided to be our friend – indeed, the word in Greek can be even stronger, our lover – the one who really embraces us and is as close as we can imagine. Very near the heart of Christian prayer is getting over the idea that God is somewhere a very, very long way off, so that we have to shout very loudly to be heard. On the contrary: God has decided to be an intimate friend and he has decided to make us part of his family, and we always pray on that basis.”

Within our friendship with God, we are to pray and discern what is on God's heart for our lives, our community and all of creation.

The basis of this friendship is love.

Jesus commands his followers: “abide in my love.” Abide in the **love that is mine**. I first loved you with my life and death and resurrection. God reached out in a way humans could best understand, in a human being, Jesus, inviting us into a relationship of love.

Abide in my love. Dwell or stay in my all-giving love, as the branches need to stay connected to the Vine, (earlier in the passage). This goes beyond resting in the safety of God's sheltering love. As we are anchored in that love, we are called to obey the commandment – love one another with the love that I have for you. God's love is supremely revealed in how we relate to one another, and we all know only too well how demanding relationships can be! Particularly in challenging situations, where we feel in survival mode ourselves.

Dr Kenneth Mtata, representing the World Council of Churches, visited Sudan in April. He described his heart as broken by what he had witnessed of the ravages of the civil war in Sudan. But as he visited with internally displaced people, Mtata saw struggling people still taking care of each other. "They have started providing classes for the children," he said. "They have prepared some routines where they can play with them, give them some moments to draw, get the children to express their feelings." Even during great suffering, they are showing costly love to one another.

Jesus says... **If / When / Since** you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Love one another, since I have loved you.

We may well ask of Jesus, what right do you have to demand this of us? To which he replies, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We celebrate this truth, fresh in our hearts this Easter season.

Looking back over this last week, where has life demanded that you love in this way? When have you noticed that you were abiding in love, and granted the strength to forgive, to be faithful in a relationship or situation where it would be easier to back off? This abiding in love, in a Christian community, is a counter-cultural witness in a world that is full of divisions and painful conflict. As we abide in God's love, we ask for grace to help us forgive one another and let go of grudges to heal the wounds that spoil God's image in us.

The fruit of this friendship is joy.

I chose you for joy! Jesus' words: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, your joy may be complete, (fulfilled)."

Joy in Christ does not undermine or belittle our pain. As Sam Wells puts it: “The risen Lord is the crucified Lord: he bears the scars and shows the wounds. This isn’t a matter of joy replacing sorrow, it’s about joy outlasting sorrow.” (S. Wells, *How to Preach*, p.157)

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned and tortured for many years in communist Romania. Though enduring appalling suffering and broken health, he tells how he learned to rejoice in his cold, dark cell, leaving his guards bewildered by what they saw.

“I found that joy can be acquired like a habit. I learned to rejoice in the worst conditions.” This is faith-full resistance, that trusts in a different story, one in which the Risen Christ is always with us and strengthens us to love one another.

Psalm 51, a prayer most likely written by King David, after he had made such a mess of things. In his brokenness he turns back to God and he prays: Restore unto me the joy of your salvation. Joy is fulfilled in us as we turn towards God, to ask and receive God’s love and forgiveness.

Our Risen Lord, this Easter Season, bears the scars and shows the wounds of his suffering. Joy doesn’t negate our pain, but in Christ Jesus joy will still take root in our lives and outlast our sorrow.

Jesus said – you did not choose me but I chose you to bear fruit, fruit that will last – eternal fruits of Kingdom that grow in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit – the fruits of friendship, sacrificial love and Joy in Christ. **Amen**

