

Easter VI, 5th May 2024

Jn.15:9-17

One of the things vicars do is go into schools and let children ask questions. Ask anything, we tell them, and so they do, questions of all sorts. Do you live in the church? What does God look like? Does He have a hobby? Sometimes, you only think of the best answer long after the class has ended. And was the case when a child asked me recently, *does God believe in you?*

Does God believe in you?

That question, and today's readings, got me thinking.

I'm going to take it for granted that God thinks I exist: he made me, so I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm real.

The more difficult question, maybe, is whether he really believes in me. And in you. Whether he thinks we're worthwhile, whether he thinks we're good, whether there was much *point* in making us.

After all, when you look at human beings in general and maybe yourself in particular, it would be very easy to conclude that actually, no: human beings aren't really worth it. Whatever God thought he was doing in creating us, making us in his own image, making us to be the ones he could work with, the ones he could live and love with well, it pretty obviously didn't work out. Battles and bad news and tears, that's what human beings are: from the grand-scale public disasters of our wars, to the small miseries of each private life. You could understand God doing as we're told he did at the beginning of the story of Noah and the Flood: just deciding that he was sorry he'd made us, that we hadn't worked out, that it was time to start again.

But whatever we make of that beginning to the Noah story, the Bible as a whole and the bit of John's Gospel that we've read this morning is very clear that God doesn't do that. God does not give up on the human race. *I've called you friends*, says Jesus. *Friends*. I don't call you slaves or servants, I call you *friends*, because I've shown you who God really is and what life is really about, and I trust you to get on and do it. I've chosen you. You who think you are so unworthy, so messed up, so not very impressive: I've chosen you, and I have called you my friends. And I *trust* you to bear fruit, to do and be what God wants. I *believe* in you.

So here's the good news for this morning. We are not rubbish. God believes in us. He trusts us to accomplish what He wants. And what he wants is neither mystifying, nor impossible: we can know it, and we can do it.

And what he wants is very simple: love one another, as I have loved you. Lay down your lives for one another.

Now that doesn't necessarily mean love one another in the sense of feeling all warm and soppy and soft about each other. Nor, at the other end of the spectrum, does laying down one's life for the other mean actually, literally dying for them. It might, sometimes, but not most of the time.

No, what it means is something much more straightforward than that. To love each other is to consistently behave as if each other's interests are more important than our own. To direct our energy, our effort, our life into making others flourish. It's when you live that other-centered life that you are bearing the fruit that God wants, that you're being who he made you to be. Being the you He believes in.

How do you live an other centred life? Well, before addressing what it might like look like, remember first how it is even possible. This passage from John's Gospel leads straight on from last week's, where Jesus spoke of being the true vine, and our being branches in him. And as I said last week, the point of that image is to say that He isn't just a teacher. He isn't just a good example, somebody outside of us who we try to copy. No. This is Eastertide, this is an Easter Gospel, and the resurrection truth is that Jesus Christ is alive and shares his life with us. If you're a Christian, Jesus Christ is living within you, just as the vine lives in its

branches. His energy, his love, his life is happening inside you. That's the whole point of prayer, baptism, communion, the church, *everything*. Christ living in us and through us. And it's only insofar as we remember that, and welcome it, and ask for that truth about us to become every more real, ever more powerful, that we will find ourselves living the other-centred life. As Paul said, it's not really us that do it, or certainly not us alone – it is Christ within us.

So, rooted in prayer, joined up with Christ, we live lives that give life to others. What does it mean practically? Well, of course, it isn't just one thing you do. It could be supporting charities, or visiting the sick, or comforting the bereaved, or nurturing children: it's all these things, and a zillion more besides. In pretty much everything we do, there's the possibility to be other-centred, and that's what God calls us to do.

But to pick just one for this morning: maybe one of the most important ways we can lay down our lives for each other is in the most undramatic, unglamorous way imaginable. Maybe the best act of love we could give to someone is just to spend some serious time listening to them. It can be very, very hard to really listen to people. It's one reason why so much of the conversation we have with each other is often rather superficial: we don't find it easy to deal with what's really at the heart of people – their pain, their loneliness, their anxiety, their grief – so we'd much rather talk about their work, about the weather, about politics and sport. But there's so much pain in this community: in this parish, and in this congregation. There are so many people just longing for someone to really be with them – not necessarily to solve their problems, not to give good advice, but just to connect, just to listen and be there. And if you've ever tried to do that, ever tried to really listen, you'll know it's hard, it's costly, it is – just a little – laying your life down. And if you've ever really been listened to, you'll know quite how important, quite how wonderful it is.

Now I suspect, if you're anything like me, that you have a fairly shrewd sense of where you might need to do just that. Of *who* it is that really needs you to slow down, to listen, to carry some of their load. And if you're anything like me, you will also – at least sometimes – pretty deliberately choose not to do so. Because there's always something more important to do. More urgent, more useful. So here's the challenge for this week. Just once, don't do the more important thing. Don't be more urgent, and more useful. Make the time for the person you know who is in difficulty or pain, and open yourself to some of it. One conversation, one real openness to another person's needs. Think now, of who it's going to be. Pray for them, and then go, talk to them. Because God believes in you. He believes in you so much, that He's made you the way through which his love and healing can touch that person. He calls you his friend. Don't let him down.