



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 6th April 2025

Readings: *Psalm 126; Philippians 3.10-14; John 12.1-8*

Passion Sunday, with the Ordination and Induction of Elders

Two years ago, I made the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. It was a thirty-day spiritual workout, largely in silence. I am increasingly grateful for it. It took one, as if naked, to the core of one's being. There were things I faced that I have hidden even from myself for a very long time. It was exacting and painful. It was healing and renewing.

St Ignatius' genius is that before he guides the retreatant into the stark realities of their own lives, and of the cross of Christ, he spends the first five days immersing one in the love of God. Ephesians 3 sums it up perfectly.

'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'¹

Of course, I already knew those words. Of course, I treasured them. They have 'filled my mouth with laughter and made my heart sing for joy'.² But five silent days of being marinated in them so that they became part of one's very being, was exactly what was needed to be able to enter into the spiritual workout and self-examination. Only because I had been soaked in the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God could I dare to face God with the truth of my humanity.

Shortly, when we continue with the ordination and induction of elders, we will hear the phrase, 'Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service.'³

It is a ministry that we are all called to offer, not to earn God's favour but to respond to the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God.

We don't offer our ministry that God might come to love us, but because in Jesus we see that God does love us.

And that matters, because if our Christian life is in the hope of God's love sometime after tomorrow, when the going gets tough in the church or in the world, we might find that we're inclined to give up. Offering the ministry, however, as a response to God's love in Christ, gives us the model of what love costs, and of how love triumphs. We are, after all, Easter people, whose faith is rooted in the conviction that 'love's redeeming work is not only done' but undefeated.

Whilst today is about Helen and Sonya, George, Hannah, Hazel, Ian, Pippa and Owen, it is also about all of us. They are not taking on something for us, but with us. We are with them this morning not as spectators but partners, not as observers but colleagues. This is not just about what they are doing with their baptism, but about what each of us is doing with ours.

In today's readings we heard different people's way of expressing their commitment to God. The Psalmist helped us long to do better: Make our barren places fruitful and our emptiness overflow. St Paul, in prison where he could have been discouraged, even despairing, urges us not to dilute our commitment, not to give up when the going gets tough, not to leave everything to others: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on ...' And, welcoming Jesus to the home she shares with Martha her sister, Mary anoints his feet and dries them with her hair. It's a gesture that is at once both rich in obeisance and unexpectedly erotically charged, as if to show there is no part of our humanity that we should not see as part of what we offer to God.

¹ Ephesians 3.18f

² Grosh-Miller Carla A. 2014 *Psalm 126 Redux* in *Psalms Redux: poems and prayers* Norwich: Canterbury Press page 78

³ United Reformed Church 2024 *Worship from the United Reformed Church – Ordination and Induction of Elders* London: URC page X3

In the notes for the Lent House groups, based upon John's Gospel, it was suggested that for John 'the central question is how we relate to ... Jesus.' And so it is for us all. Whether we are entertaining a call to eldership, or wondering how we can assist the church with our energy and skills, or reviewing our monetary giving, to ensure that the church remains financially stable for the future, and not just flush now, 'the central question is how do we relate to ... Jesus.' In Mary and Martha, we have models of how we might relate to Jesus. Serving him, worshipping him, loving him. Shelves full of commentaries have discussed the nuances of the sisters' relating to Jesus, but the bottom line is, *relate they do*.

David Ford, in the commentary that is inspiring the house groups, implies that a model friend of Jesus is one who knows themselves loved, one who loves others, one who trusts God as they find God in Jesus, and one who is active, living out that love, in a practical way.⁴ Inevitably, we will not all be a friend of Jesus in the same way. Some will be more fascinated than convinced, some will find faith easy, whilst others won't, some will follow, whether or not their fascination has yet led to faith. There's been some of all of those sorts of friends of Jesus in every church I have ever known.

Now, some of us will not even like the language of being Jesus' 'friends'. It's too intimate; too informal for relating to 'the source, guide and goal of all that is'.⁵ I use 'friend' because Jesus himself did, but, if you don't like the word 'friend', that's fine. After all, one of my theology tutors didn't warm to such thinking either. 'It's the Lord God *Almighty*,' he opined, 'not *Almatey*'. But let's not let semantics get in the way of sincerity. Not least, because just as for *some* 'friend' doesn't work, for *others*, it is precisely the intimacy and familiarity of the God Jesus offers and that Mary found, which enables them even to entertain believing.

Let's not impose upon one another the requirement of identical ways of relating to Jesus, nor even of language for speaking of God. If God is your mother, then that's the authentic way for you to relate to her. And if God relates to you as a father, then that is your authentic experience. After all, Mary and Martha didn't treat Jesus the same way – one preparing their guest's meal, the other anointing their guest's feet.

But in all of this variety let's be as one in *taking Jesus seriously*. To take Jesus seriously, is not to ignore Jesus – neither the promise of his good news, nor the persistence of his call to follow. To take Jesus seriously, is not to leave to everyone else the work Jesus needs doing. To take Jesus seriously, is not to expect others to pay for the work the church does in Jesus' name, but to give what we can, be it widow's mite, or tycoon's millions. Hear this, too. To take Jesus seriously, is to recognise that in life's different seasons we will relate to him differently: with the *wide-eyed joy* of children, with the *legitimate interrogation* of sceptical students, with the *wisdom* of experience, with the *humility* of knowing that the older we get the more we know we don't know. Taking Jesus seriously also involves the *acceptance* that we really do reach the point where we have done our bit, and can legitimately 'sit down', albeit to continue with the most powerful part of all, to pray.

Being part of the Church by leading its life and work, by joining in its life and work, and by coughing up the cash to enable it to happen, is an expression of that fascination, that faith, that following which is at the heart of taking seriously the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God that we see in Jesus.

And above all, it is our thank offering. God in Christ gives the very essence of who God is – coming at the incarnation, suffering on the cross, triumphing at the empty tomb, and we simply but sincerely say 'thank you, here I am Lord, send me'.

N. P. Uden

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⁴ Ford, David F. 2012 *The Gospel of John: a theological commentary* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic page 232

⁵ Romans 11.36 (New English Bible)