

Sermon

When is love easy? When is it difficult? Think for yourselves – maybe share...

To claim love is easy, to live love is difficult.

Yet, in Jesus, we find the example of love perfectly lived out. We also find the power to live love to the fullest.

We hear today in our reading...

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus, the source of all love, aims to share God's love with all people. When we hear Jesus' message of love and when the love of God becomes lived out in our lives...then we also come to know something about joy.

Jesus came: to invite us to share in God's own joy through love.

Today is a strange but joyful day – with (only a few of you / lots of you / whatever we have of you) I am so joyful /we are so joyful that we can be back together after such a long time in the wilderness - and what better day than St Swithun's Day for us to be together.

Our gospel reading starts by telling us Jesus came to love and to teach us to love, then we are told that this love will lead to joy – joy that is 'complete'. Jesus commands something that affects the very core of our being. To love is the fundamental act of being human. We all understand the language of love – and I believe – following this reading - it is the greatest thing we can do, the highest thing we can achieve, the pinnacle of being humankind's achievements is to love.

But - to claim love is easy, to live love is difficult...

What makes St Swithun's Church amazing – is the incredible love we share – whether we are distant because of covid – whether we are together in person – St Swithun's church is a church family who really love – deeply and joyfully – and we know that this can bring us, and those who come to us, joy. But it isn't something we should take for granted – or think we have sewn up – loving truly takes work and effort and requires cost for us... as it cost Jesus.

And as we worship together – we need to keep that aim to love and to bring joy in our centre – despite our lack of hymn singing, our lack of peace sharing, our lack of refreshments and having to be speedy and careful and hygienic – despite these really difficult aspects today – let us keep at our heart our love and joy as we are having to be church right now.

As we pray together – let us remember the love and joy at the heart of who we are... sometimes we think when we come to church we need to be terribly serious and earnest – and then we have to live a life of being good which is often mistaken for dullness... One of my many favourite quotes is from Robert Louis Stevenson who said 'if your morals make your dreary, depend upon it, they are wrong.' Andi believe the same is true of Spirituality - Jesus came to give us life, and life more abundantly, one of the fruits of the spirit is 'joy' – love, joy and peace. So if your spirituality makes your dreary, depend upon it, it is wrong.

The Church exists to celebrate the love of God, and to share that love with the world in the most effective way possible. And it should be joyful – not dreary!

To be honest – the church is renowned for being a bit dreary – probably because it isn't that keen on change. Even for the church - to claim love is easy, to live love is difficult.

However what is right for today will not be right for fifty years time. And what was right fifty years ago is not right for today. We have to change if we are to continue to be able to bring God's love into our world.

What doesn't change is the good news of God's love.

God's love is eternal and unchanging, but society changes, and how God's love is expressed changes. As a church we recognise changes we need to respond to by asserting ourselves as an inclusive church – acknowledging that God's eternal and unchanging love is for everyone – regardless of anything – we remember as a church – that we are all loved by God – saying this is easy – living it as we know is difficult – but we are committed to it and we keep working on it...

Covid has forced us to embrace changes this year – and I hope that we have grown as a church – despite this- and that we have continued to love and find joy in Christ despite the challenging year – I hope that this learning and enforced change will help us in the future. Today as we return to a sense of normality - we must remember that we cannot go back – but we must embrace our changes and move with the Spirit in these times...

To claim love is easy, to live love is difficult...

But if we do aim to live love – if we try to do what we were created to do, Jesus promises that we can experience the greatest joy we are capable of. Complete joy.

Jesus as usual doesn't talk about small or mean or imaginary when he talks about God's gifts. The fruit of the Holy Spirit that is joy is complete joy. Overflowing. Overwhelming.

I think the life of St Swithuns is like that.

Like everyone else we have had a challenge and a knock back in the lock-down.

But the love of God is still at our heart. Our task is still the same. And God's presence and promise is still the same.

I hope this time of change for us as a church, is something we can embrace – to focus on the love and the joy we have – rather than bemoaning the differences...

But for us – in this unique time - to claim love is easy, to live love is difficult – to have to be different to have to care about each other in new ways.

We need a spirit of adventure. We need a spirit of exploration and experimentation. 2 Timothy 1 verse 7: Paul writes "...God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love..."

We need to be hungry for the next revelation of God. We need to experiment, even if our experiments don't work, we need to be prepared to give things a try.

Even though there is still a lot we long for – to be back together in church as a larger group with music and dancing and peace sharing and everything – we need to remember that our core – the St Swithun's core is loving and that brings us deep joy – whatever the challenges.

Even though - claiming love is easy and living love is difficult – we can do this though all the crazy changes – with the costs we have to cope with – we can do this together...

And despite all the things we are struggling with – change is partaking in the constant renewal of our lives and our common life that springs for our response to God’s love – which brings us joy....

Claiming love is easy – but living love is not that easy – and is costly – we’ve got this... together...

SO – as we embrace the many changes we have thrown at us - let us live in love – in God’s love – and may that love bring us joy – complete joy.

Amen