

Sermon: G7 Speakers' Conference Service

St. Laurence's Chorley, Sunday 19th September 2021



+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hopefully the theme of friendship and your experience of being together here in Lancashire this weekend are not too far apart from one another! In Sir Lindsay you have the most amazing host, and here in St. Laurence's we pray for him and his work every Tuesday lunchtime at our service of Communion for the Community.

From the very beginning of time, as we read in the book of Genesis, God created us to live in community. And though we often say we live with a partner or spouse, (sometimes with a friend), when that partner or spouse also fulfils the role of a best friend then that relationship is on the firmest possible foundation. Friendships are not optional in life. They are essential.

But as we know in so many aspects of our day jobs, or working life, co-existing with others in order to fulfil a role is not the same thing as forging deep and lasting working friendships. One of the things that so many communities and organisations have missed deeply this past year or so is the chance to meet together for anything of a social nature. Technology may well help us to get straight to the point when it comes to meetings, but it's the unscripted conversations which take place when we co-exist without an agenda that help friendships, even working friendships to develop. And so it is this weekend.

For there to be good working relationships and friendships there needs to be trust. When our relationships lack trust, they lack a firm foundation. In so many different ways, in so many different settings this weekend, trust will have been built because you have spent time with each other, over and above that which appears on a business agenda.

Friendships are not optional. And friendships require us to invest in them.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus refers not to commandments – plural - but the singular commandment. A mandate. This is the new commandment of an earlier chapter (Chapter 13 of St. John) and it is repeated here in Chapter 15. The disciples' love for one another is compared to Jesus' love for them. How has Jesus shown his love for the disciples? This was illustrated in the washing of the disciples' feet. The love the disciples are to have for one another is so great that it must include a self-sacrificial willingness to die for one another if necessary. We need to keep the washing of the disciples feet in mind when we hear Jesus say 'this is my commandment'.

It is not just the degree or intensity of the disciples' love for one another that Jesus is referring to when he introduces by comparison his own death on the cross (that they must love one another enough to die for one another) but the very means of expressing that love: it is to express itself in self-sacrifice for one another, sacrifice up to the point of death, which is what Jesus himself did on the cross.

If you were to apply this to political life – what would the political stage look like? How would debates be shaped if we truly looked to the needs of others rather than ourselves? Is it possible to engage in political life in a self-sacrificial way? Perhaps that's a question to ponder today.

The Canadian philosopher and theologian Jean Vanier has written a book called “*The Scandal of Service*” – *Jesus washes our feet*. And in it he writes:

If Jesus washes his disciples' feet, it is not just to give them a lesson in humility, which they could have understood, even if it might be difficult to accept. The washing of the feet is a mystery, which we can only enter through a gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus brings a whole new vision, a whole new way of living, which is impossible if we rely on our own human resources. The washing of the feet summarises the teaching and the message of Jesus. Actions speak louder than words.

Can we say of our political structures that they bring “a whole new vision, a whole new way of living”? If not, why not?

401 years ago, Myles Standish and others set sail for a New World. They were compelled by a new vision, a new way of living. We have celebrated the story of Myles Standish and the founding fathers again this weekend. The very special gift of a new American Flag to hang in this church is a symbol of friendship and unity. For us here in St. Laurence's it is a gift beyond price and we are truly indebted to Speaker Pelosi for this gift.

The gift of friendship, with each other, with God, is a pearl beyond price.

May God bless the nations represented here with the gift of friendship. And may your political actions speak louder than words, and bring with them a whole new vision, a whole new way of living.

Amen

Fr. Neil Kelley

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