***Farewell Sermon: July 14th 2024: 1 Kings 13, Mark 5***

Standing here today, in this pulpit where I have come to feel so much at home, for the final time as your Rector is just as hard as I expected.

I’ve absolutely relished my time here, as I may perhaps have shown. I have been very happy here indeed. We have done some extraordinary things together. We’ve written a page in the history of this community and Archdeaconry which is at odds with the wider forces affecting most churches in our broad tradition. We have changed the narrative as we’ve grown in faith and confidence, in numbers and impact.

We have shown that Churches grow when they work hard to be as kind and loving as Jesus. That Churches grow when they put the same barriers in place about belonging and membership as Jesus does, which is say barriers at all. That Churches grow when they take the right things seriously, like people and community, and treat the things which are not at all important, like who gets the credit, with utter disdain. That Churches grow when they commit to being safe and inclusive as a statement of core belief and identity.

We are not perfect by all means. We do not have it all sorted. But we have tried to build a culture in which every voice is heard and respected, believing fervently that wisdom is found in every single heart and that every life matters equally. Believing that every newcomer is a gift straight from God, adding new ideas *and* insights to our common life which enrich all of us. Thank you all for all of that & so much more.

Today is a day when words do not adequately convey the emotion, when there is a gap between what I say and the depth of what I truly mean. Which is true about all of the most powerful experiences we have. Which is partly why we have the sacraments- weddings and funerals, baptisms and the Eucharist. The structure and security of these services help us to express things, to feel things, to hold things.

When things are hard, as they are today, we can rest on the things we have learned together- on the God who does not change even when the landscape changes around us, the God who we have learnt to trust and has never let us down, who has shown himself to be more caring, more generous, more active, more exciting, more wonderful than we dared to dream.

The Eucharist, this feast, is the most wonderful gift of all because it contains truths which lie too deep for words. Christ himself invites us *all* to eat. We see ourselves reflected in God’s tender gaze, mirrored in the eyes of love. We are given an image of what the community should be, how the church must be, because of who Jesus is and what he has done *for* us. *This* is the feast where we all bring the best we can offer in terms of prayer and music and art and service and, together, we create something which is our very best endeavour in response to God’s outpoured and outstretched love.

This is the hour which makes sense of the rest of the week, and of the whole of our lives. Loved into wholeness, loved back to life, here we come face to face with the Living Jesus- and then we are sent out into the world to live like the people we realise we are through this feast- loved into loveliness, breathed into life, set ablaze/ to be light and warmth and hope by the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Friends, we are changed. We are no longer ourselves alone. Meeting Jesus changes everything. We have been conscripted. We are equipped and then sent out to live bravely and confidently for the One who calls us out of darkness/ into his marvellous light.

All of this we have learnt and celebrated and rejoiced in over these last 11 years together. And all of it is rooted in what we have heard read this morning. That Jesus is *for* us, radically aligning himself with us, longing for us to flourish. That is the heart of the Gospel- that even a stolen healing becomes the moment for an encounter/ which changes the life of a woman who has been outcast and forgotten for 12 years. Meeting Jesus changes everything.

We do so much to complicate things in the church. It is not complex for Jesus at all- any barrier between God’s heart and God’s people must be torn down. / Fling wide the doors and let God’s glory in. Let justice flow like mighty waters. Let healing come now.

When Jairus falls to his knees Jesus heads immediately to his home. His robe is touched on the way. He turns and seeks out the one who needed to touch God so much. He finds her and he tells her that it is her courage, her determination, her faith which has given her healing, making her no longer passive and overlooked but the hero of her own adventure.

Think how much we've done together in almost 12 years, think of the good and the holy, and the community we've built in all three churches: and then think what it would be like to have missed out on all of that, because that's how long the woman with the haemorrhage was excluded from her community. Meeting Jesus changes everything. That is the Jesus we need to share, and continue to build this parish on, because we can't let anyone be that alone, that separated from God, for 12 days let alone 12 years.

And when Jesus continues on, he finds the girl dead. He reaches into the grave and lifts her back to the light again. Not even death can be allowed to block the flow of God’s healing power. Meeting Jesus changes everything for her as well.

Julia Stankova’s amazing icon on the wall behind me, by the candle stand, is a beautiful expression of the heart of today’s Gospel. That Jesus sees us, every one of us. He sees *you*. And he loves *you*. And he longs for you to be set free from everything which imprisons, limits and shallowly defines you. He has come to release the captive and set free the prisoner. Every barrier and every boundary must be torn down to let the light stream in. Which is what we are for: which is what we are called to be part of.

And Jesus does all of this because he is rooted in the God who meets Elijah not in wind or earthquake or fire but in the sheer sound of silence after the storm. It is this calmness which we are called back to in today’s readings, in today’s service, in the midst of all of today’s storm of emotion/ and always. A voice of calm which calls us to rest and be still/, to breathe out our anxiety and to breathe in love, to breathe out our fear and to breathe in God’s care and acceptance.

Whatever we face God is there./ Whatever good we build God is part of./ Whatever we flee from God is with us./ Whatever causes us delight God dances too./

Whatever illness, disappointment, loss, anxiety- God is there. Whatever pleasure, fulfilment, success, friendship- God is there.

And when we are sent out at the end of this service as God’s redeemed people we are sent out like rain into a parched world, like food into a hungering world, like healing to a hurting world, like light and hope in a world of injustice and despair.

Knowing who we are and whose we are because of this feast, we are sent out to love and serve the world. And I have to say, my dear, dear friends, that it does not get any better, more exciting, more important than that.

Today we pause perhaps to hear the still small voice of calm- and then tomorrow we go again, following Christ, God’s holy people made one in this holy feast/ and then sent out to love and serve God’s holy creation, tomorrow and tomorrow’s tomorrow and always.

Meeting Jesus changes everything. It does for the girl who is brought back to life, and for the woman who was rejected for 12 years. And it has for us as well. And it will continue to do so in the weeks and months and years to come. The one who calls is faithful. He has proved it time and time and time again. And he is not about to change that now. Amen.