

FAREWELL – Rev'd Catherine Eaton - Sunday 28th February 2010

Readings: 1 John 4.7-12, Ps 27.1-10, 16-17, Mat 25.14-29

I remember thinking some years ago – all my family's gone but thank God, I won't ever have to do that deep grief again. But then I met you lot, and here I am, grieving again!

Over these years you have become as family to me.

- You've watched me grow, stayed with me in my bumbblings and stumblings, my mistakes and failures, you've joined in with my crazy ideas, you've supported and loved me through it all. You have welcomed me in.
- You've shared your lives with me, your daily joys and sorrows.
- We've weathered wild storms and storms in tea-cups together, we've celebrated countless significant moments, and we've walked together the daily path of the ordinary, gathering wisdom, love and hope as we went.

So today, my grief goes deep, but that is because my love for you goes deep, my love for this community, this place, this holy world we have inhabited together.

But times change and life changes. Things don't fit like they used to. Going through some old boxes of stuff a few weeks ago I found a small plastic bag. Curious, I pulled out some black cloth. It took me a moment to realise what it was – 'Good Lord! It's the Little Black Dress'. Why I'd kept it all these years I've no idea.

- I can't actually remember which bit of me it used to fit. I don't think it was ever a good fit, but things have their times and seasons, then things change. So an offering for the Op Shop!
- Like the dress, it's time to let go this role as Vicar. It no longer fits, and maybe it too wasn't always a good fit. But you as community fitted me perfectly and I thank God daily for bringing me here.

So what should I say to you on this day? Three simple things from today's readings.

First, love one another.

- Love – because love is of God and you are of God. Love must be your signature tune! Love one another, love God's world - all God's people, all God's creation, love yourselves, love God, love the people who irritate you, love the journey of life itself, its challenges, its daily routines, and its possibilities. Love because love is your calling and love must be your choice.
- But not blind, sentimental, over-attached love. Rather love that is wise and discerning, that calls people to their fullest potential, love that expects the best and creates the free spaces where life can be lived without fear, love that opens hearts and minds for a future as yet unknown.
- Now is a time for love.

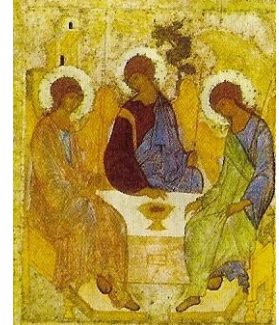
Second, use the talents God has entrusted to you.

- Each of you has been entrusted with something for God's continuing purposes here. Gifts and talents, opportunities, insights, skills, daily lives, money, practical things and relationships, hearts full of hope and whisperings of prayer – all entrusted to you for the unfolding, little by little, of God's good purposes here.
- God has invested heavily in this community over the last 10 years, and in each of you. So don't let it be in vain, continue on. Don't waste what God has lavishly poured upon us.

- You are entrusted with holding the strength of this parish now. It's not up to the locum, or even the next Vicar. The clergy are there to support and to guide. This is up to you.
- And like the gospel, God is here now saying, 'my investment in you needs to come to fruition'.
- Now is a time for you to take your part.

Third, nurture this community.

- On your pewsheet you'll see Rublev's icon of the Trinity - the community of God, interdependent, mutual, respectful, and open, welcoming to all who would be part of God.
- You are God's community and this is your model – each of you acknowledging the other with humble respect and attention, recognising your dependence on each other, and together holding the holy space of community so others can be welcomed in.

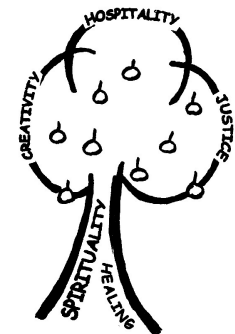


Three things – love one another, use your gifts, and build community – all basic Christian teaching, fundamentals of our faith, so of course you'll say, 'oh, yes, what a good idea! That's what we've got to do'. But by tomorrow chances we'll all be back to criticizing others, refusing to share, hurting each other, and so on.

Love one another, use your gifts, and build community - they may be fundamentals but they're all hard to do, so 3 starting points:

1. **First, be aware:** You may have noticed a sign near the entrance to the ferry – "If you see something, say something!" The ferry crew can't be aware of everything all the time – this is about shared and public responsibility. The sign reminds us that we can't be just passengers, tourists, spectators standing there saying: 'Oh, look, that boy's fallen in the water. That ferry's going to run over him'".
 - Or more often being critics – "That boy's fallen in the water. Wouldn't you think the ferry driver would stop! Wouldn't you think they'd train them better! Wouldn't you think mothers would be more careful with their children! Wouldn't you think the council would put up a fence!" And so on. We all have a responsibility for the well-being of our community. We can't simply stand by as spectators watching accidents happen, or simply being critics when they do.
 - Each of you has a responsibility for the well-being of this parish. Be aware - be aware of what's going on. Be aware of who is missing, of how people are feeling. Be aware when love is struggling. Be aware when something needs doing. Be aware of God and what God might be doing. And most of all be aware of yourself. Ask yourself – in this particular moment what is my responsibility? What is needed in this moment and what is the loving thing for me to do?
 - This is not about jumping into the ferry and taking over the steering wheel. Today's gospel is about what God is realistically asking of you in each moment. What is my responsibility here? What has God given me for this moment? Don't simply be a spectator, or someone who shields their eyes, or a critic on the sidelines – this is your community and the quality of love that is here starts with you!

2. **Second - deal with the baggage:** When I came to this parish, I spent hours and hours listening to stories about previous vicars and parishioners and what they had and hadn't done. So and so did this, and so and so did that, and I'm angry this didn't happen and disappointed he didn't do that, and this one hurt me and this one failed me and so on. All clergy make mistakes, disappoint people, and obviously I am no different.
- So this is the time to deal with any baggage left behind from these 10 years. If you need to, come and talk to me. If you need to tell me about your hurts and angers and disappointments. Obviously, I can't undo things, but I can apologise if necessary or explain, and I can hear you and understand.
 - Deal with your disappointments and resentments now – don't carry them into the next Vicar's term and land them on him or her. Don't waste their time and yours - you will need all your energy and focus for finding your way into the future.
 - Deal with it now or let it go. Otherwise, the past will become a distraction from the loving work you need to do now as you hold this community for its future.
 - Deal with it now or let it go.
3. **Third, hold onto the Tree of Life:** This symbol of our life together has been quietly growing within us over the years.
- At times we've done some deep digging to help the roots of the tree to grow. Sometimes these have been messy times or times when nothing much seemed to be happening. Other times we've been more deliberate in growing our faith and the prayer and strengthening the trunk. Other times we've actively worked at stretching out our branches to give a place of rest and nesting to others.
 - But mostly, the tree is in the background, shaping us, and growing, like any tree, without us actively forcing or controlling it. As someone once said, 'only God can grow a tree' and that has been our experience here – what has grown and blossomed amongst us is of God, is God's doing.
 - Whatever happens for your future, and while each of you must share the responsibility for the life and health of this community, remember, ultimately, it is God who gives the growth, God who brings great trees out of small seeds.
 - The tree also holds the values that have been central to our journey:
 - o Spirituality – keep praying!
 - o Creativity – keep open!
 - o Hospitality – keep welcoming!
 - o Justice – keep sharing!
 - o Healing – keep tending the hurts.
 - These things will guide your love, free up your talents, and keep you as community.
 - And don't forget the Mission Statement you adopted last year - Following Christ, Nurturing Community. This is a time for you to explore what that means – if this is key to who you



are, then this will guide you as you pray your way towards your new Vicar and the next stage of this parish's life.

- When your new vicar comes, maybe you will let all this go and adopt a new image and a new vision, but until then, hold onto the Tree of Life, for it is Christ's life in you and it will remain steady through all the ups and downs of the coming months.
- Some years ago, one of our parishioners told me of a dream he had. He said in the dream he was struggling. I was there in the dream and he said to me in the dream, 'What should I do?' and apparently I said to him, 'Hold onto the Tree.' So now I say to you 'Hold onto the Tree', for it is Christ himself growing in you.

Three fundamentals for you - love one another, use your gifts, and build community.
And three starting points – be aware, deal with the baggage, and hold onto the Tree.

Your time starts now – and each of you has a part to play.
God bless and keep you all.

Catherine Eaton