

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 25th May 2025 i.e. 6th Sunday of Easter. Today Leo was baptised in our 0945 service.

Acts 16:9-15

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

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

If you've been to St Mary's before you may have already heard what I have to say about love. We use the word love a lot, but many of us would struggle to say what exactly it means. I say there are two parts to love. One part of loving someone is that you want what's best for that person. The other part of loving them is that you want to be with them. If you've got both of those things – you want what's best for a person and you want to be with them – then we say that you love that person. If you're missing one of those things, then you don't.

Love is complicated. Experience teaches us that love isn't “all or nothing”: it's possible to love someone a bit. I might want to do good things for a person but only some of the time, or want to be with them only some of the time. That's one reason why love is complicated. Another is that we don't always know what's best for a person: it may not be the same as what that person thinks is best for them. And there are all sorts of reasons why we might wish someone well, but we don't actually want to be with them. Knowing that love is made of those two things at least gives us a place to start.

The three Bible readings we had today are all about love. Specifically, they are about that second part of loving someone: wanting to be with them.

Our first reading this morning is part of a bigger story. Jesus' friends are learning that following him and loving people in the way he loved them means going to places they'd never been before. So Paul the Apostle has a vision about a stranger who pleads with him to visit Macedonia, a place he has no connection to; and after thinking about it he and his companions go there. On arrival they meet an important person in that country, Lydia, who invites them into her home. Despite starting off as strangers they find that they want to be together. The love the apostles show in going out there is met by the loving acceptance and welcome of Lydia and her people. In love they go out, and in love they are received and welcomed. That's our first reading.

People have always used temples and churches as a sign of their relationship with their gods. I think

the idea is that you make a house for your god. If your god chooses to live there then you know your god likes you, and whenever you want to be close to your god you know where to go. But the writer of our second Bible reading says that at the very end of all things, when God has made all things new, we will not need temples and churches any more. The final home of human beings is a city, the New Jerusalem; and there is no temple in that city – God himself is the temple. At the end of all things God will live with people, and they will never need to go looking for him, just as they will never need the light of lamps or the light of the sun; God will just be there with them.

This is exactly what Jesus is talking about in our third reading. And he tells us what it means:

Those who love me will keep my word, [he says,] and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

On one level it's a bit strange that Jesus is saying this, because he knows that shortly after this speech he will be separated from his friends – that's what we remember on Good Friday. He is saying it to reassure them: that even though he is going away he will be with them again. And he's able to give them another bit of reassurance: just as the disciples already know Jesus and his Father, they are about to meet God in a third person: "...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name..." The Holy Spirit is always being sent, and people are especially aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit at difficult times when God might feel far away. Even in those difficult times, God is showing that he loves us.

So the overriding message of what we've heard this morning is that God loves us and wants to be with us. If God wants to be with us, we should also want to be with each other. We can't be truly loving if we don't stick around; that's why we meet together every Sunday, and at other times too. It's also why the Church of England puts churches in every community in this country – it's a sign of loving presence. We're here for this community: we're not going anywhere.

It's also why we baptise people. Sam: it's great to have you and Leo and the family here today. As far as I'm concerned this is your church; you are so welcome here.

My brothers and sisters, part of my hope for St Mary's is that we will learn the lesson of that Acts reading this morning. Even now there are people who are pleading with us to go out and be with them – to show them that simple act of love. I pray that we will hear that call, and that we will have the courage to respond.

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