

SERMON FOR PASSION SUNDAY – Rev Anne Taylor

John 11: 1-6, 17-27, 38-45

The set reading for this morning is one of the longest in the church's year – 45 verses!

I have shortened it for this bulletin but in this time of enforced leisure you may want to read the full passage to verse 45. It certainly rewards a full reading because, apart from the resurrection stories of the first Easter, it is a passage full of hope, giving us the assurance that this life is not the only life but is, rather, a prelude to the life of the world to come. In verse 25 Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

But for today I want to reflect on two themes from the earlier verses.

Firstly, we read in Luke 9:58 Jesus says, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus was an itinerant preacher, constantly on the move. He hadn't a house of his own to which he could retreat and lock the door for a break or a rest. But there was one place where he could lay down his head and feel relaxed – and that was in the home of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus in Bethany, a few miles from Jerusalem. There Jesus could be himself as he stayed among friends whom he loved and who loved him.

That very human need of Jesus emphasises the beauty and value – and necessity – of friendship. John Donne famously said, "No man is an island." And in these times of enforced isolation and social distancing due to the coronavirus we are realising how much we are social animals and how much friendship means to us. Up to a few weeks ago we perhaps never thought too much of being able to go out with friends and family, going for meals and coffee with them, meeting them in the pub. But now we know what a precious gift contact and communication is.

Last Sunday, thanks to a team of volunteers, primulas were distributed to many around the parish, and we have been overwhelmed by the response. They were delivered by a knock on the door, a short conversation from 6 feet away, an assurance we were thinking of them. What a difference that made!

Now, more than ever, friendship is so important.

And secondly, it's a bit surprising to read in today's Gospel that Jesus didn't respond immediately when he got the message that his friend Lazarus was ill.

This is one of the puzzling responses of Jesus that we come across in the Gospels – like his apparent reluctance to help the young couple who had just got married in Cana (John 2:4) and his hesitation about healing the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28).

In today's incident Jesus is across Jordan, away from Jerusalem. Bethany was just outside Jerusalem. In the previous chapter of John's Gospel we read that the last time Jesus had been in Jerusalem he was not only challenged by the religious leaders in the Temple, but they tried to stone him for claiming that "The Father and I are one." The leaders tried to arrest him but "he escaped from their hands" (10:39).

Jesus knew that to go to Jerusalem again would be the beginning of the end – as it proved to be.

But because he loved Lazarus, Jesus went. The proof of his love was in what he did.

And so for us. We can talk about love till the cows come home, but unless it is translated into action, unless the 'talk' becomes the 'walk', all our talk will be hollow – like the “noisy gong and the clanging cymbal” of 1 Corinthians 13.

Again for us today, love and friendship means a willingness on the part of those who can to do some runs for shopping or to collect prescriptions for those who cannot or should not leave their homes. The proof of love is in what we do. And what can every one of us do to help another? Make contact. 'Phone a Friend' is the famous line from the quiz programme 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire'. Well it now needs to be our strapline. By phoning someone else we offer the wealth of love and friendship.

I know we are all missing our gatherings together in church each week to worship as a community. There is a great loss of being upheld by the community. But as we try to follow Jesus' example of love, let's think of how we put our love for others in our church family and beyond into action, however limited that action must be because of the current restrictions.

Above all, let's keep in contact with one another and continue to pray for one another. We now all have two things in common – the fact that we have to live through this present difficult time together and we all can be pulled together by God's love and hope for each us. United we will survive the days and months ahead.

Friendship is a priceless gift
That can't be bought or sold,
But its value is far greater
Than a mountain made of gold.

For gold is cold and lifeless,
It cannot see nor hear,
And in your times of trouble,
It is powerless to cheer.

It has no ears to listen,
No heart to understand.
It cannot bring you comfort
Or reach out a helping hand.

So when you ask God for a gift,
Be thankful that he sends,
Not diamonds, pearls, or riches,
But the love of a real, true friend.

Amen.