Sermon at St John's, 28th June 2026

Rev. James Shakespeare

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

From our Gospel, words of Jesus in Matthew 10.42,

'Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones… truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward...'

& Our Mission Statement, here at St John's, the fruit of a 4-year journey of discernment, concluding in 2022,

'St John's aspires to be a welcoming, hospitable & diverse Christian community, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, nurturing disciples, serving our neighbours & building God's transforming Kingdom.'

How do we welcome one another + build relationships and communities of Christ-like love, in a world like this?

In our Gospel, Jesus concludes his instructions to the disciples - sent out to share the good news of the kingdom - as he began, with words about hospitality and relationships. Those who welcome the disciples, and who act generously towards the little ones, are blessed and will be rewarded. *'Whoever welcomes you' Jesus reassures his disciples – sent out in mission & service – welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'*

Jesus makes clear, in this passage, that almost as important as the word itself, is the manner in which it's received and shared; in other words hospitality and generosity of spirit (both for the giver and the receiver – indeed, in God's economy, the two are often reversed) are just as important as the proclamation itself. Something that the first disciples would have to be taught, if they were to be effective: hospitality & generosity of spirit really do matter.

The Word, after all, becomes flesh in Jesus, and Jesus – in his hospitality and desire to build relationships of mutual love – models to the disciples what a true witness to God's Kingdom looks like. As the missionary theologian, Lesley Newbeggin, once wrote, '*The best hermeneutic of the Gospel is a community of men and women who live the Gospel.'* In other words, the best way of witnessing to Christ is to strive to follow Christ and to embody his words, in action.

The word in itself – especially in a culture saturate by information overload – is never enough. People want to see a word that is embodied and lived out… in hospitality and compassion, in relationship, and in communities of Christ-like love. *'Whoever gives even a cup of water to one of these little ones… truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward...'*

I often wonder who are the little ones, to whom Jesus refers, in Matthew's Gospel? Of course, on one level, they are simply the disciples- humble, self-effacing, down-to-earth followers of Jesus, without any pretence; just like you & me. But it is also suggested that Jesus is here, with the use of the word 'little ones' also deliberately referring to those who are lowly & of vulnerable status, whether they be women, children, those who are disabled or on the edge of our community, just as the early followers of Jesus often found themselves. And we can all resonate, in this time of intense heat, with the simple act of hospitality, in welcoming such a one with as little, but transforming a gesture, as providing a cup of water…

I wonder what it was that 1st drew you to the Gospel; to belonging within a Church community? I suspect that for most of us (whether or not we were brought up as Christians; or were members of a Choir or Sunday School), that it had something to do with being drawn by people who sought to practise what they preached. Communities of love & service (of salt & light) who welcomed others in and reached out in love & care of those in need. Just like we sought to do, before Covid, here at St John's, by providing a pop-up homeless night shelter, during winter – through the Cambridge Churches Homelessness Project – or in helping to establish the local mutual aid scheme, during Covid; and indeed the 'warm winter' café immediately following the pandemic, as the cost of living crisis took hold, and many experienced – as they still do – acute loneliness & isolation.

Writing in the Church Times, Philip North (the Bishop of Blackburn), reflected on the needs of our society and strategies for renewal in our Churches; and he suggested that what really matters most is relationships. '*The heart of the Gospel'* he writes, '*is the healing of relationships between God and his creation, and thus between people, whom he calls to belong to each other. We have a bold vision of what human society is called to be, one that we draw from the life of the Trinity itself… in which the beauty and dignity of all is acknowledged & respected, in which God is all in all.'*

I wonder how we, at St John's, in this fast-moving global city, with all its privileges, opportunities & also challenges, best open our doors, and to build transforming Christian community here, in such a way that proclaims Christ as much by our actions, as by our words? Welcoming not only those who look like us, but Christians from diverse cultures & communities around the world; as well as brothers & sisters seeking a way, a welcome & a word or gesture, in challenging times.

In 1935, a young Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, disturbed by the direction which society was taking in his native Germany, wrote a letter to his brother, Karl-Friedrich, in which he expressed this sentiment: '*The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism… a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount, in imitation of Christ.'*

And the amazing thing was that Bonhoeffer sought to do just that. He gathered a community around him, out of which a book was inspired – all about what the daring enterprise of living Christian community really looks like – 'Better together'. And years later, long after Bonhoeffer's martyrdom, significant numbers of Christians, across the western world, are being inspired to do just that: living what they call a 'new monastic' life, in their homes and parishes and work-places, seeking – in some small but no less real way – to follow the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, as the earliest Christian did, and remembering that the medium really is as important as the message: living hospitality and relationship, seeking to have the same mind (as St Paul put it) '*that was in Christ Jesus'*.

As one of the Desert Fathers once commented: '*You don't build a house by starting with the roof and working down. You start with the foundations… The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win. The neighbour is where we start. Every commandment of Christ depends on this.'*

Jesus sends out the disciples – and he sends us out - to preach the good news of his Kingdom. But above all, he invites us, frail and fragile as we maybe, nonetheless to dare to live the good news we proclaim: in word & action, in hospitality, community and generous love.

In a frenetic world, a world of individualism and calculated self-interest, daring to carve out oases of Christ-like love and attentiveness that His light might burn brightly through us, drawing others to the living flame of God's love… *Amen.*