Acts 10:44-end; 1 John 5:1-6; **John 15:9-17**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

We heard last week about the vine and abiding in the vine. And here we are with that word abide again today. But this time abide in my love. This is the follow-on from last week, picking up immediately after the vine and branches stuff.

And just to put it in context, this is all part of Jesus’ goodbye speech to the disciples – a very long goodbye – at the Last Supper. He’d washed their feet and was sat down eating with them for the final time, trying to prepare them for his departure. As he had done on numerous occasions before, but they had failed to grasp it; and this was his last chance. He needed them to understand about loving others in the same way as he loved them. The fundamental message of the gospels.

I was talking to someone a long while ago and they said to me ‘nobody ever told me that God loved me before’………. So for all of you who are in that boat, here it is now: God loves you. And me. Even though we all try Him mightily from time to time, God loves us.

Do we preach that message enough? Maybe not if that person was telling me he or she had never heard it. (It is actually a message that is difficult to hear, because many of us, in many different circumstances, find it hard to believe that we are that lovable.)

So, here, once and for all, it is: God loves us. Each one of us: he knows and loves as individuals.

But the other phrase that popped out when I was cogitating on today’s readings was the servants and friends bit – and as I did so, in that strange way that sometimes happens, up popped one of those little cartoon-y things on my computer: **If you want breakfast in bed, sleep in the kitchen….** Scary, what that computer knows about me….

When I was fifteen, the house I was born into – which was also the house my mother was born into – was put under compulsory purchase so that they could build a dual carriageway all the way from Newcastle to the coast. My parents bought a wreck of a Victorian terraced house with sea views, and in the process of doing it up and making it liveable-in, we uncovered a whole set of bells on a board in the kitchen. Someone had obviously removed the bell pulls from the upstairs rooms but had left the bits that rang downstairs to summon the hired help, the servants. Sadly for me, the servants, and the possibility of breakfast in bed, had long gone.

But I can’t help thinking of that row of bells when I hear this discourse; Jesus talking about the disciples being not servants but friends.

By way of an aside: the word he used translates more as slaves than servants, and it is impossible not to call to mind, however briefly, that slavery exists today as it did thousands of years ago – among owners (and I use that word deliberately) of flower-pickers in Cornwall, or car-washers in the South East, or fruit pickers, or among pimps selling bodies in pretty well every country in the world.

There is a fundamental difference though between being someone’s servant – or slave - and being someone’s friend. A servant acts out of duty, whereas a friend acts out of love. You can be the best servant ever yet not care about, or even like, the person who pays your wages. You just have to do your job, do what you are paid to do. A friend, on the other hand, acts entirely out of love. And therein lies the distinction.

In the Biblical world, the whole notion of servanthood didn’t actually have the negative connotations it came to have later; there was honour and identity in serving a master well. A servant learned from a master, took direction from him. When the master of a household was converted to the Way, his whole household – servants as well as family – was baptised. And servants served with loyalty and affection. So for Jesus to refer to the disciples as servants wasn’t shocking. What was shocking was having him act as servant to them and washing their feet, as he had just done before they sat down to the Last Supper. There was honour in servanthood, but it only went so far. And in this instance, one way. 😊

And when we Christians look properly, we recognise that we are all servants in the sense that our primary aim in life is to serve God — through worship, through service to others, through seeking justice for those who have no voice.

Jesus announces this transition in his relationship with the disciples, but it’s not an invitation to abdication of duty. Rather, it shifts the motivation for service from duty or obligation, to love.

One of the other possible distinctions between servant and friend is an ability to see the bigger picture. Servants might generally focus on a single task – the kitchen maid and the housemaid in that Victorian house would have worked entirely separately: one to prepare meals and the other to dust and to keep the fires going for example. They wouldn’t be expected to chat to visitors or to know where the family members were going if they went out. Friends, on the other hand, are brought into the conversation. They get the broad view not just a single piece of the puzzle.

And so as Jesus prepares to leave his earthly life, he is inviting the disciples into this new relationship. This Farewell Discourse goes on for four chapters, but the transition from servant to friend gives us all a new perspective. We see that Jesus’ life and ministry matters not because he healed a few people two thousand years ago, but because it was about healing the world.

We will be celebrating the Ascension this coming Thursday at 8pm here in church. This tells the story of Jesus returning to God the Father after his post-resurrection appearances. So this message about servants and friends was part of the work of moving the disciples forward as Jesus handed over the earthly work of serving God to them.

They are going to be taking over as stewards of the embryo community that would become the Church. He is entrusting them with the most valuable thing there is — the care of God’s people, the people he loves without reservation.

As we learn more about being disciples ourselves; as we pray and read our Bibles and meet together as a Christian community, so we are gradually drawn into a closer relationship with this Son of God, who though he was human was also totally divine. We learn that he is for each of us a friend who can be relied-upon, but who calls us too to be friends who can be relied-upon by others.

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

 **Amen**