

## St Mary's Fetcham – Institution of Pouya Heidari

### John 15, 4 – 17

<sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

<sup>12</sup> 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup> I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Sense of surprise tonight. (Not just that finally we're here, even if we can't 'all' be here). Surprised by joy at Jesus. Surprised at the

revelation of God's love – 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you'. Surprised at the sheer reality of God's call, 'You did not choose me but I chose you'.

I believe that there's a good deal of surprise – and delight I hope – that God's revelation of love and the reality of a call should be embodied in God's bringing of Pouya here to Fetcham. In the interview panel's listening to Pouya's testimony – the utter marvel of Jesus revealing himself and his saving love to a faithful Muslim in circumstances where Jesus is utterly out of bounds, and responding was indeed a matter of laying down one's life. In his and Debra's very clear discernment that God was calling them to Fetcham before they'd ever even been here or spoken to anyone. I think I can speak for them as well as for the panel involved in the process of this appointment that there was a sense of awe at Jesus' love, at the Father's call, at the Spirit's fingerprints. So exciting, it was palpable and took our breath away. Of course it is just what our systems are there for – yet I'll admit so often our management can pretend to control, the institutional machinery of church can quell rather than swell the surprises of Jesus. Perhaps esp in Surrey we need reminding that the vine is not ours. Pouya, this calling is not yours. People of St Mary's, this church is not yours. Let's get over ourselves. Let's allow God to leave us open mouthed and breathless– as if to take our breath away and replace it with the Spirit's breath.

So, just for a moment, I urge that we be still and know who is God. God is here, among us, alive and kicking and engaging, with the love that brought Jesus to lay down his life for us. The sacrifice that means we are grafted into the vine. That's what matters. That's what sustains, That's what unites. That's what delivers growth. We're invited to abide right there. To drink it in. To remain.

Church wardens, before you get carried away with vision and strategy, pause and abide. Musicians, before you meet to perfect your techniques for leading worship, pause and abide. Management

team, before you jump into lengthy agendas because there's so much that 'needs doing', pause and abide. (I'm preaching to myself above all – before I attempt to tame the inbox and email every time I get to my desk and turn on the computer: pause, and abide. Drink in God's providence and presence, Christ's Lordship and love. There's little point in any of the rest of church, and certainly nothing to differentiate us from the Rotary club or the golf club, if the love of God isn't coursing through our veins. We will be healthy branches if we're drinking deeply from Jesus who is the vine. There is such a thing as unhealthy growth – yesterday I was pinching out those side shoots that energetically seek to take over my tomato plants. That kind of growth looks so good in the short term– but ultimately it undermines healthy growth, it diminishes fruitfulness.

Abiding in the vine is also the cure for anxiety. It may be that Fetcham is not an anxious place, I don't know. Though I doubt it. There are so many good reasons for the whole world to be anxious just now – most immediately the pandemic whose variants chase through the Greek alphabet as fast as our vaccines seek to keep up; more fundamentally the climate crisis which takes far greater effort and technology than any vaccine. And that's before we turn to any political issues threatening the social fabric of this national state; or community issues of housing or schooling or football here in Fetcham, let alone the domestic agonies behind so many of our front doors. Let's be clear that Jesus has no quick fix answer to any of these things: but he does invite us to abide in his love. The love that is strong enough to move mountains is strong enough to sustain us in the midst of struggle and strife; strong enough to bring us to love our neighbours and our enemies; strong enough to bring us to get over ourselves to live our lives for the sake of others; strong enough to unite the branches of St Mary's so that the vine of Jesus that is planted in Fetcham may be sturdy and strong, self-evident in its health, its wellbeing, its welcome, its trustworthiness. It's branches

wide enough to embrace those who don't belong or don't agree. Secure enough to take risks, socially or financially or perhaps even theologically. Tall enough not to worry about any dividing walls. Gentle enough to acknowledge error and to act humbly. Self-evident in displaying the love of God and the fruitfulness of that love. It's infectious. It's irresistible. When nothing else is left, it will be all there is. God's love remains. May it reign in Fetcham.

Amen.