

Sermon – Paul Day’s licensing 8.12.20 – Ven Jenny Tomlinson

Philippians 2:1-11

You can always tell when footballers have been given excellent media training. In the post-match interview, when they’ve scored three goals or whatever, they explain that it’s all because of the manager and their team mates.

In the Christian community, usually without media training, we also talk about working as a team, and at our best, we deflect any praise and congratulation in exactly the same way – we mention our colleagues and other members of the congregation. As St Paul wrote, we seek to be of one mind and to look to the interests of others. As we work and serve together there’s no place for prima donnas – of course we all have our moments, but together we’re focused on being the Body of Christ wherever God has placed us. That is why our service this evening is not entirely about Paul!

We’re so pleased to be able to gather in person, albeit in smaller numbers than we would have liked. We’re also conscious of the sadness that you couldn’t say farewell properly to Peter when he retired - so at some point you can have a really big party, just not now! We’re so thankful that Paul has heard and responded to God’s call to a new chapter of ministry here, but he doesn’t do that alone.

As we declared in the responses at the beginning of the service, the gifts of the Spirit are given so that we can minister together, and at the end, we will hear the words of commissioning addressed to us all.

It’s a powerful sign of God’s work in your midst that your new incumbent has been called from among you. Your love and prayers have continued to shape and form Paul, and his ministry has shaped and formed you. There’s a mutuality about the process. It quickly became clear that Paul’s ministry here, with the strategic missional thinking and innovation that he and Peter introduced, should be continued and enhanced. I even had unsolicited emails saying just that! That’s a sign of a vision and ministry which belongs not to one or two individuals but to the whole community of this parish. We found that we were in full accord and of one mind about this decision, as Philippians 2 expresses it. Paul will continue to use his considerable gifts and experience in mission to build on all that’s been introduced – Messy Church, for example, and the developments in schools work, as well as looking to the future to see what the focus needs to be in the parish of Shirley as the new normal emerges, and we work together within our *People and Places* framework.

The details will need to be the matter of prayer and careful discernment, but our passage this evening makes clear what really matters. Underlying all our decisions, we need the mind of Christ. Humility, unity and selflessness are key.

The writer C.S. Lewis said that humility isn't thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. Unity comes when together we look to Jesus and seek his mind. And it's the inspiration of Jesus' whole life which prompts us to live like him and not for ourselves. It's all about the direction of travel.

Before Covid, a group of young musicians, one of whom I know, was doing a tour of concerts in one another's home towns. They left Saffron Walden in north Essex late one evening to move on to Doncaster, following the sat nav directions. Unfortunately, instead of putting DN into the sat nav, a typo meant that it was BN. No one thought it was strange that they were on the M25 crossing the River Thames, going into Kent in order to get to Yorkshire, and it was only when they were on the outskirts of Brighton that they realised they were in completely the wrong place. The whole direction of travel was wrong, not just a wrong turning.

As Christians, we need to get the direction of travel right - away from ourselves. To empty ourselves, to lay aside personal preferences and habits, to be obedient, does go against our instincts in many ways. But let's focus on why we do that, We empty ourselves of pride and selfishness so that we can be filled with the grace of God. We lay aside our own preferences so that we're ready to take up the work and roles which God has prepared for us. We're obedient because we recognise that in the centre of God's loving purposes we will find our deepest fulfilment and play our part in the coming of God's Kingdom. Jesus became obedient to the point of death – and God highly exalted him. When we glimpse and grasp just something of the beauty and grace of Jesus, of the love and welcome we find in him, then we bow down in worship and adoration, and selfish and self-centred desires and instincts fade away.

As you move forward with Paul as your incumbent, our prayer is that together you will have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus. May you see Jesus more clearly and share his love and grace with many others, so that at his name, every knee should bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Amen