Called to be Faithful
Saint Mary and Saint Peter, Tidenham and Saint Luke, Tutshill.
The 15th Sunday after Trinity, 2020

2 Timothy 4:1-8
John 21:15-19

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

Who are we called to be? What are we called to be? As individuals, as Christian people in this part of the vineyard? As a church? That is the question that we have been posing every Sunday since the beginning of the summer, and we moving now into the last month or so of this sermon series. And today we consider: Called to be Faithful. Called to be faithful.

What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to be called to the faithful life, or to a life of faithfulness?

Yesterday morning some of us will have had the beginning of the answer made very clear to us indeed as we gathered, mostly online rather than in person, for Nicki’s ordination to the Sacred diaconate. What a monumental occasion, and congratulations, Nicki, and blessings to you. And pretty much as I’m speaking David Rees, one of our other curates, is being ordained to the Sacred priesthood in the cathedral.

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And ordination services are if you like concentrated lump of teaching on what faithfulness is supposed to look like. The Bishop says a bunch of stuff, and then something is done symbolically as well. And I just want to share one thing that is said, and one thing this is done this morning.

Firstly the things it said. The Bishop will say to David this morning, and to Nicki in a year, the following: “with all God’s people you are to tell the story of God’s love.” With all God’s people you are to tell the story of God’s love.

That is a vision of the faithful church. What we here for? To tell the story of God’s love. And what does that mean? Well primarily it means the story of the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that is why tradition in the church one of the roles, one of the tasks of the deacon, is to read the gospel. In some churches only the deacon does that. In other places, like here, we share that ministry much more widely. But in a sense whenever any of us read the words of the gospel aloud in church we are doing the work of a deacon. Proclaiming the story. And that is why Nicki, today, on her first morning in the parish as a deacon has declared to us the story of our salvation. With all God’s people you are to tell the story of God’s love.

And you know, that is basically it. I reckon in a nutshell that is a pretty good definition of faithfulness.

Now telling that story is going to be a different sort of challenge at different times of life, in different sorts of situations. How does your life tell the story of God’s love? I don’t know. But part of being faithful as a Christian is really about being attentive always to that question: am I telling the story of God’s love? In the way I live. In how I pray. In the choices I make. In the places I go. St Francis of Assisi almost certainly didn’t say “preach the gospel, and if necessary use words”, but it’s a great quote anyway, and it’s the sort of thing he would have said.

And there are clues for us in the readings this morning that I’ve chosen. The reading from second Timothy contains that vital line: “preach the word in season and out of season.” That’s about consistency. It’s about steadiness. It is about faithfulness.
It’s a bit like what I say to couples when I’m preparing them for marriage. If you look at the marriage vows, they are about faithfulness. The individual things that you vow are also important, but the thrust of the whole thing is about steadiness, consistency, faithfulness.

The same is true for each one of us in our Christian life. To be faithful to God is to be consistent in our response to the promise of new life. Not to be blown around by every eddy and back current. Not to be constantly looking for what’s next. And not to be so overcome by stuff, by tasks, that we neglect the prayer, the worship, the primary call on every Christian which is to put ourselves before God and wait for him to speak.

I chose the section from the last chapter of St John’s Gospel because it speaks deeply of this idea of faithfulness. Peter and Christ have this extraordinary conversation. Three times he is asked, do you love me? Three times he says, ‘yes I do’. Three times he is then told what loving Christ looks like: it looks like feeding, tending the flock. It looks like forming and holding a community. And it looks like being obedient. And it looks like growing up.

There is so much in this passage, but just note those three things. Peter was told that when he was young he went whenever he wanted, but when he gets old someone else will take him where he doesn’t want to go. And of course the Scripture itself makes the point that this is a foreshadowing of Peter’s own martyrdom. But the deeper point you get don’t you? As we mature in our Christian lives, we have to learn to prioritise God’s call over what we want to do. And that’s a lifelong task. Quieting our own instinctive desires in order that we can hear the still small voice of calm: the voice of God. That’s why we pray. And as we do that we begin to be sensitive to the way in which God is nudging us to go.

Faithfulness to the call of God means we are ready to grow throughout our entire lives, to grow through obedience to the call of God, and to be committed to loving, tending, feeding the community, the flock, the family of God.

I don’t know whether any of you watched the recent documentary film about the Cistercian monks at Mount St Bernard’s Abbey? You can buy it as a DVD, and it is also available online. There is the most extraordinary humbling bit in it where this really experienced monk whose been in the Abbey for I don’t know, 30 or 40 years is asked what his ambition is. And he says I hope that one day I will become a monk.

Brothers and sisters, being faithful asks of us patience, discipline, endurance, but also hope. Lots and lots of hope.

*Riff on music*

And hope, above all, because what we are faithful to, is, with all God’s people, to tell the story of God’s love.

Amen.