

## **The Friends of Malvern Priory Choral Evensong – Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June 6.30 pm.**

### **Sermon by Mary Weatherill LLM.**

We meet in this wonderful Priory church to celebrate and give thanks for the work of the Friends of Malvern Priory - who do so much to support the care and repair of this building, and to nourish the life of the Church.

Here is a place, a space, where - in a wide range of ways - people come together, lives are touched, the community is helped to flourish and people find peace.

In our first reading this evening we heard part of the prophet Haggai's messages to the Jewish people of Jerusalem in about 520BC, after their return from exile in Babylon. It seems the Jews had forgotten God, choosing instead to focus on their own interests, so Haggai directed them to finish rebuilding their destroyed temple, to show that the Lord was at the centre of their lives. Through the physical act of rebuilding the temple, the people would indicate a shift in their spiritual lives: from devotion to self towards devotion to God.

Haggai's encouragement to rebuild the temple in the face of the neglect brings to mind St Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to build their lives on the foundation of Jesus Christ. As we sang in our first hymn, 'Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and corner-stone'.

And we heard that God said to the Jews through Haggai 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house, and in this place I will grant peace.'

Churches are often places of peace. Last month my husband and I spent a few days in Liverpool, and in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, on the wall just below the west window, is a modern art installation by Tracey Emin – a 20ft pink neon sign in her own handwriting which reads "I felt you and I knew you loved me". They are her words which describe her own encounter in Liverpool Cathedral. "I felt you and I knew you loved me." ... You may not like the pink neon light, but the sentiment is moving – to know that this famous artist felt the presence of God in that cathedral, as so many others have, and was aware that God loved her at that moment, certainly moved *me*. When it was installed, Tracey Emin said she wanted "to make something for Liverpool cathedral about love and the sharing of love"... "I felt you and I knew you loved me."

And that brings me to our New Testament reading this evening: Jesus said to his disciples: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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.'

Like many of you, my husband and I are Friends of Malvern Priory. And while preparing this sermon I began to consider what it means to be a friend – not just a member of the Priory Friends, but what it means to be a friend in the general sense of the word. Jesus called his followers his friends – and that includes those of us who follow Him today. He is telling us that God is not distant, not some far-off being who is uninterested in our lives, but our friend.

Friends are close to us. They are people we can trust and rely on, people who know what's going on in our lives and do their best to help us in good times and in bad. Friends are welcoming and do things together. The presence of friends makes us feel safe – but sometimes friends take us by surprise and show we didn't know them as well as we thought we did.

And all that applies to our relationship with God. He is someone we can trust and rely on. He welcomes us with open arms, he is our strength and support in good times and bad – and, yes, sometimes he takes us by surprise. It's a friendship that we scarcely deserve, but that Jesus extends to us freely through his death and resurrection.

Of course the other very important point about friendship is that it's a 2-way thing. The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said "The only way to *have* a friend is to *be* a friend." Friendship requires time, being together, working on common tasks, sharing. We cannot be a friend alone – a friendship, by definition, is a relationship. That applies to our friendship with God too – we need to spend time with him, through prayer, worship and Bible reading; we need to work on shared tasks, doing his work here on earth. So let's make sure that we are all God's friends. And that means not just taking care of our church building, but taking care of all God's people, showing God's love to our community & to the world.

Friendship with Jesus is something that we enter into freely – having felt his hand of friendship reach out to us. If we then reach out *our* hand of friendship to other people, they too may feel the presence of God and know that He loves them... "I felt you and I knew you loved me."

Jesus said 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command you.' The heart of our Christian calling is to love God, to love one another, to love our neighbour as ourselves. We do so because God loves us. That is why our Priory church is here. A symbol of the love of God made known in Christ, and a place in which our love for God in worship, and our love for each other in community, is expressed and brought to life. Long may that continue. So that more people may say "I felt you and I knew you loved me."



Tracey Emin, Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral.