

Sunday, 17th May 2020 All-Age Worship
Sermon by Andrea Ward

INTRODUCTION - Word association game

How many words or phrases can you think of that go with the word “home”?

Here's some that I came up with:

Welcome home / Home sweet home / Homecoming / Charity begins at home

Now, of course, there's one phrase which we've all been very familiar with recently and you know what it is: **Stay at home....**

As I write this, I've just heard that the government is modifying the slogan so it's now “Stay alert”!

Normally, for most, if not all of us, our home is a place where we like being, where we can relax and be ourselves, a place where we enjoy some rest and recreation, a sense of security. We're probably all feeling rather differently about our homes at the moment, because we've been spending almost all of our time there. We're probably feeling bored of looking at the four walls of our homes; we want to get out and do lots of the things we've not been able to do for 8 weeks.

So, it may be that at the moment we'd really rather be somewhere else other than at home. A time will come again, when we're able to resume normal daily life, and hopefully we'll feel better about home again.

Homes feature in both our bible readings this morning, and it's a theme we're going to think about a bit more together.

BIBLE READINGS Acts 16:9-15 & John 14:23-29

SERMON

So, we're thinking this morning about the theme of Home!

In John 14, we heard Jesus say ‘Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.’

And in the story of Lydia and Paul, we hear how Lydia, when she became a Christian and was baptized, invited Paul and his friends to stay with her at her home.

One of the things that some of us like to do, in normal times, is to invite people round to our house or to pop round to see family, friends, neighbours in their homes.

If you're of school age, I wonder which of your friends do you like inviting round to play, or hang out with? Or whose home do you go round to? When we get together with others at home, what do we do? We chat (hopefully!), maybe eat together or have a coffee / tea; laugh, joke, talk about important things together, watch a film....

Jesus seemed to love spending time with people in their homes. And in John's gospel, when the disciples met Jesus for the first time, the first thing he did was to invite them to come and see he was staying - come and see my pad, my home.

I wonder if you can remember some of the times when Jesus visited people in their homes?

Examples: Luke 5 - at the house of Matthew, the tax collector; Luke 10 - at the home of Martha and Mary; Luke 7 - invited to the home of Simon, the Pharisee;

Sometimes Jesus invited himself round! The story of Zacchaeus.

Jesus seemed to love spending time with people in their homes, eating, feasting, chatting about life, telling stories, teaching.

If you'd been there when Jesus was alive, and he'd asked to come and visit you in your home, I wonder how you'd have felt?

Take a moment to think

Special? Important? Honoured? Excited? Surprised - why me?

Wow! Jesus wants to be friends with me!

After all the friendship, intimacy, comradeship that the disciples and others had enjoyed with Jesus, in John 14 Jesus introduces them to the idea that he's going to be leaving them to go back to another home, home with his Father:

"My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." *John 14:2-3*

You can imagine when they heard Jesus say this, the shock waves that must have gone through them. How they would miss his presence, his company, his companionship! And imagine how those who became Christians in the days after Jesus had risen and returned to heaven, could have felt when they heard the stories of Jesus eating and sharing with people in their homes - feeling they'd missed out on the kind of intimacy and closeness to Jesus that people had experienced when he was with people physically, in their homes e.g. Mary sitting at Jesus's feet; Matthew holding a banquet for him...

The promise of one day having a room in the Father's house in heaven, sharing with Jesus again over food was wonderful. But how about the here and now? How about for us today? Well, if we thought having Jesus come to stay in your physical home wasn't enough, Jesus had an even greater promise:

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” *John 14:23*

Jesus wanted to reassure them that while he wouldn't be present physically anymore, they could continue to know his presence, his being with them. They and we need never feel that we're home alone, on our own, because Jesus has promised that he and his Father will come and make their home in us.

The Lord, who had always dwelled in a place, a Temple, the Holy of Holies where no one except a priest could enter, was going to come and make his home in you and me! Yes, we still meet with the Lord in buildings - in our church building on Magpie Hall Road and we look forward to sensing his presence there among us when we meet together there again to worship. But God has taken up residence in us, in anyone who loves Him and has welcomed him.

I'm sure that Jesus had many memories of meals at people's homes in mind, some recorded in the bible and many that weren't, when he spoke to John in a vision, all those years after he had returned to his Father in heaven:

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” *Revelation 3:20:*

It's a wonderful picture in which Jesus is saying, for anyone who listens to me and welcomes me, I will come into your heart and be with you and share my life with you, and enjoy the kind of depth of friendship and intimacy of eating together...

But how is God dwelling in us possible? Through the coming of the Holy Spirit, of course - that great and wonderful day that we shall be celebrating in two weeks time at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit who, Jesus tells us, is our Advocate - supporting us, standing by our side, encouraging us, defending us; our Teacher - who reminds us of God's word and God's ways, guiding us; our Comforter - bringing peace within our troubles; the One who never leaves us on our own.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” *John 14:27*

With God, Jesus and the Father dwelling within us, by the Holy Spirit, there is nothing that can happen in our life and in this world that will ever be able to separate us from God's love dwelling in us. Yes, we may feel afraid and troubled at times because of what life throws up at us, but Jesus promises that he and the Father are in us and with us, and we can receive and rest in God's peace.

But isn't there a caveat, a condition on this wonderful promise of God dwelling in us, making his home within us?

John 14:23, Jesus says:

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

No one wants to stay or live in a home where they don't feel welcome, where they know that the person has uninvited them. God won't stay with us if we tell him he's no longer

welcome. But Jesus isn't saying, "We'll only stay with you if you never do anything wrong. Disobey my teaching and we're off!"

A mother or father who loves their children doesn't tell them, every time they do something wrong, "I'm leaving the house, you're on your own". How much less would our Father in heaven, whose love for us is perfect, say, "We're off" every time we fail to obey Him. We may certainly feel less aware of his presence within us at those times, because we've chosen to ignore him and have acted as if he isn't dwelling within us. But he doesn't abandon us.

As Julian of Norwich so beautifully put it: 'The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will nevermore vacate, for in us is his home of homes'.

I mentioned right at the beginning, that both our bible readings talk about homes. So, briefly, then, what of our Acts reading?

Luke, the author, tells us how (Acts 16:13-15):

"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us."

Lydia, the purple cloth dealer, is a wonderful example of someone who heard Jesus knocking at the door of her heart, through the message of Paul, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, welcomed the Lord - turned the door handle and invited him in to share life with her.

And how wonderful, that having welcomed the Lord to make his home in her, her natural instinct was to then invite the messenger, Paul and his friends, to her home: "Come and stay at my house." No doubt, being a fairly wealthy woman, there was probably quite a feast that took place that evening! But the point is that it seemed to have been a natural instinct for Lydia to want to generously share company, food, friendship with those through whom she'd received the deep, inner friendship of the Lord.

At the moment, we may not be able to invite people round to our homes as an expression of our experience of God dwelling in our inner home, our heart, but we can find many other ways, at this time, to share generously and freely with others of the friendship, the peace, the love and security that we know through the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

"Freely you have received, freely give", Jesus said. So, as we have received the wonderful, generous gift of God making his home with and in us, may we seek his guidance for how we can generously share our gift with others.

Amen.