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Sunday after the next will be 50 days after Easter, also the same day when we shall have our last service in this building. During our AGM last Sunday, Wendy said, *It will be sad day when we have our last service in this building!* It will indeed, and we can sing with Barbara Streisand,

Memory, all alone in the moonlight, I can dream of the old days. Life was beautiful then. I remember the time, I knew what happiness was.

Memories are a good thing; memories can either keep us anchored to the past, or memories can release us into the future. The choice is ours; we decide what to do with **memories**.

The disciples were faced with exactly this choice: *what will we do with their memories of our time with Jesus - hang onto it and try to live in the past, or will we rejoice in the past, draw lessons from it, and wait for God to release us into His future?*

The birthday of the Church is a fortnight away. For the disciples who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, experienced the power of His resurrection, fellowshiped with the Risen Christ for 40 days, they had absolutely no idea what God had planned for them.

In a strange sort of way, I feel the same for us as a Church. One day we shall share the details of how purposefully God directed the whole project of a new building and His wisdom which shaped every little detail, and we sit at this moment, like the disciples did after Christ's ascension, we have no idea what God has planned for us, but we wait for Him to reveal His plans for us, and we wait expectantly, with hope and in prayer.

The journey as a Christian begins with this absolute firm understanding that God does not lead us down a path, unless the destination to which He is leading us, is intended **for our benefit AND for His glory**. It has to be both. It cannot be ONLY for our benefit, because we humans are better at taking than giving, tending to become proud and complacent

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and forgetting the Giver; and it cannot be only for God's glory, because God is not a tyrant or a demagogue who demands allegiance, loyalty and faithfulness. God loves us whom He created, with an everlasting love (love which has no measure and no end); He made us in His image, and one of the gifts of God to us which He enjoys, is the gift of free will. God wants us to worship Him, live by the standard of His laws, not because He demands it, but out of our own free will.

I want to read our portion of Scripture for today - John 15:1-17.

READ: John 15:1-17

One of the problems I have with this passage is that in the English, it feels so transactional, "**if** anyone does not abide in me... (v. 6); **If** you abide in me ... ask what you wish and it will be done for you (v.7); **if** you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love" (v. 10); "You are my friends **if** you do what I command" (v. 14); ending with, "These things I **command** you, so that you will love one another" (v. 17).

If we read it in that tone, none of us like to be **told/commanded** what to do. I don't think I would believe anyone who said, in their youth, they did everything they were told/commanded to do! There is a rebel in each of us, and its how we control the *rebel* in us, that matters. The problem is that morality is taught in this kind of transactional manner, *you do this, you will get this reward*. We are taught to be frightened of the consequences if we disobey, and I do believe that this has been one of two reasons why people leave the Church, *do this or else...*¹

Jesus' counsel during this discourse is exactly that: **counsel, guidance, recommendation**. Jesus is saying to us, ***If you choose to obey God's principles (laws) which govern My own life, then you will benefit from God's active participation in your life, as I do.***

¹ the other reason is the lack of teaching of God's word, which includes watering it down and misrepresenting God's Word.

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Our relationship with God through Christ, begins with this realisation that God is so very fond me, He loves me with all the love of Heaven, and because He is God, He loves each of us equally, with all the love of Heaven.

There is a wonderful story of a tired pastor who checked into a monastery for a time of rest and recuperation. One day he saw a monk sitting under a tree, weeping. Moved to comfort the monk in what the tired pastor thought was a time of grief, he drew near and sat silently next to the monk. After sometime, the monk broke the silence. *"These tears are not shed out of my love for God,"* the monk explained. *"These tears flow because I am awestruck with God's love for me. You see my friend, my Father is very, very fond of me, and I just can't take in, how much He loves me."*

It is God our Father who realises the pressure, the tension under which we live on this earth, having to put up with, and make sense of injustice, war, poverty and all the ills and problems of life. It is our God who invites us through Jesus, to take shelter in His Word, to trust in His promises, to take refuge in His love, and be safe from the onslaught of fake news, distorted theology, misrepresentation of His Word and perversion of His laws.

So at this time, well before His crucifixion, Jesus invites his followers to *make your home in Me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch² can't bear grapes by itself, but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with Me. ... if you make yourselves at home with Me and My words are at home in you, you can be sure, whatever you ask will be listened to, and acted upon. This is how My Father shows who He is—the abundant harvest of grapes you produce, shows you are growing towards maturity as My disciples.*³

² It is interesting that the Greek word for "Branch" is the word "BREAK" (*klhmata* - G2814), i.e the vine is broken by branches; the purpose of the vine is to support the branches

³ John 15:4, 7,

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The first thing we read is this, Jesus **invites us** into a relationship with Him by making ourselves at home with Him, feeding on His Word as food to sustain ourselves; making ourselves at home in Him to enjoy the treasures of His home as His blessing for us.

To be blessed by God is to enjoy the favour of God, which is to appreciate all that which God does for us, **which we cannot do for ourselves**. We can bless each other with what we can do for each other, but God's blessings are all that we cannot do for ourselves, and there is so much we cannot do for ourselves.

So only as we learn to **live in Christ**, as we learn to trust His Word and God's promises, will He release us to do His will in the world around us.

John closes his gospel narrative with this lesson.

The enigmatic character, Peter is the focus of John's narrative. Peter, the strong burly, and often surly fisherman, who was the first to declare Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God⁴, and the first to deny he ever knew Jesus⁵, was also the first to declare, he was returning to the life he left behind in order to follow Jesus⁶.

In the darkness preceding the dawn, six disciples sat by the seashore wondering what will happen next. Memories of their times with Jesus and their brief encounters after His resurrection left them confused. They could have sung Barbara's Streisand's song,

*Memory, all alone in the moonlight, I can dream of the old days.
Life was beautiful then. I remember the time, I knew what happiness
was.*

⁴ Matthew 16:13-20 and Mark 8:27-33

⁵ John 18:15-18 and 25-27; Luke 22:54-62.

⁶ John 21:3

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Peter says, *I'm going fishing!* and the others said, *we are going with you!*
Peter was indeed the leader of the gang.

They fish until the break of daylight, catch nothing, turn the boat around and head back. A voice shouts from the shore, *Children! Have you caught any fish?* *NO!* replied the disciples. *Then cast your net on the right side and you will catch some,* came the response.

Instinctively, they did; the catch was so abundant and heavy, they had difficulty hauling in the net. It was John who recognised what had happened - he remember the time on the the same lake when Peter complained they had fished all night and caught nothing, only to be swamped with fish that they needed two boats to haul it in.

They enjoy a breakfast of fresh fish, grilled to perfection, and guess what: Jesus takes bread, breaks it, wraps it around a morsel of fish and gives it to each of them. Where in their bank of memories was a similar incident? ... of course, when Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children!

After the blessing of a sumptuous breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter. *Peter, Do you love me more than these? - Peter do you love me more than these miracles of catching more fish than you can handle or consume?*

Three times Jesus asked Peter, *Peter, Do you love me more than these?*, and each time Peter replied, *Yes Lord! You know I love you,* and three times Jesus responded, *Then, feed my sheep.*

Some say, Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to undo, retract the three times he denied Him before the cockerel crowed, but it is much more than a simple restitution. Jesus was asking Peter, *Do you really abide in Me? Do you really let My Word make its home in you? Have you shed your doubts and concerns and prepared to make My life, your life - let Me abide in you and you in Me?*

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If you really have, I will release you to do things you would never imagine.

Peter's day started with:

Memory, all alone in the moonlight, I can dream of the old days. Life was beautiful then. I remember the time, I knew what happiness was.

I can imagine Peter finishing the day, singing with Barbara Streisand the rest of her song:

Soon it will be morning, Daylight. I must wait for the sunrise, I must think of a new life and I mustn't give in. When the dawn comes, Tonight will be a memory too, And a new day will begin.

That's what's involved in preparing for Pentecost: preparing our hearts and minds to celebrate God's gift of releasing the Holy Spirit to **lend His power** to the Church, to help complete God's mission on earth. As sad as the day will be, releasing this building to a memory and waiting for the new one to be completed, it is an important time for us as **God lends us His power** to accomplish His plans for Botley, Oxford and West Oxford.

But all this will be possible only when we practice **living in Christ**, getting comfortable in our relationship to trust His Word and depend on God's promises. Only then and only then, will He release us to do His will in the world around us.

AMEN.