

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Acts 10.44-end

1 John 5.1-6

John 15.9-17

We were preparing for our marriage which was still some distance away when I saw a tea set that I knew immediately was destined for our bottom drawer and I bought it. How can I describe it? To call it colourful would be to damn it with faint praise, polychromatic gets nearer to doing it justice; the incandescent red rose emblazoned on a mustard-yellow background, and generously sprinkled with gilt motifs was irresistible. And it was in a sale, a bargain which I presented in triumph to Rita. Her reception of it was, I thought, a little muted, but then she never did have my vivid imagination. And, sadly, when the dazzling objects were brought out for the first guests of our life together, Rita was uncharacteristically careless when washing them up, I grew accustomed to the shards of gilt, yellow and scarlet pottery scattered on the kitchen floor. Soon all that remained of that ceramic masterpiece was a saucer or two. It had a short working life.

Only recently my daughter asked me if I remembered that tea service. *How do you know about it?* I exclaimed. *Mum told me*, she replied, *she thought it was hideous, but never liked to tell you.*

I hope you will not be too surprised to hear that I too would now find it revolting. My tastes have changed. Over the years I absorbed something of Rita's appreciation of form and texture and of muted, subtle colours.

This is what happens to all who have been together for a long time. Each influences the other in countless ways: they come to enjoy the same food, the same music, the same films, probably vote for the same party and read the same newspaper. Their lives, by a kind of osmosis, are absorbed into each other. They come to view life through each other's eyes. But let me leave this rhapsodising and turn to John's gospel. He favoured one word above all others - *meno*, which is usually translated *abide*; it carries the suggestion of remaining at home, staying where you are and not wandering about - abiding, dwelling, enduring, continuing. John's gospel uses it 40 times. The first question the first disciples asked Jesus was, *Where are you abiding?* Much of this gospel is concerned with the answer to that question.

In our reading this morning Jesus commands his disciples to abide in his love just as he abides in his Father's love. My first response to this injunction was, *What an impossible demand!* It brought to mind Bernini's statue of Saint Teresa writhing in ecstatic agony, it conjured up visions of holy men and women lost in rapture as they gazed on a crucifix, This is surely a call to a heroic spiritual life, perhaps that of a hermit, a monk or a nun. Only someone prepared to bury themselves in the desert, in a hermitage, or a monastery could hope to fulfil this daunting calling.

That, I now believe, is wrong. Such people are the exception not the rule. What concerns us is not the heroic but the domestic. For us, at least for me, this formidable demand is better illustrated by the abiding within each other's love that a married couple or close friends experience after sharing their lives for many years. In his latest book, *The Drama of Living*,

David Ford highlights a striking phrase in one of Michael O'Siadhail's poems. The poet writes of faces wiped into the folds of our being.

I can't think of a better way of describing the sort of living together where consideration of the other's wishes becomes second nature, not only in the major decisions of life, but also in its trivia: What tie shall I wear with this suit? What shall we have for supper tonight? Where shall we go for our holidays this year? Can we afford a holiday this year? The countless questions that pull the knot of love that binds a couple together more and more tightly. They exchange the singular for the plural. It is no longer, *I will*, but, *We will*; no longer, *Mine*, but, *Ours*. In a myriad ways two lives are bound more and more closely together, folded into each other's being..

It is within this everyday context of human love and friendship that we discover the secret of abiding in his love: it becomes habitual to refer our decisions and our way of life to him. He becomes the background music to all that we do. And so we absorb his values, his attitudes, his interests. We talk to him regularly and we attend to what his words have to tell us until he gradually penetrates our lives through and through and we find ourselves abiding in his love, folded into his being, just as we abide in our closest partner's love. All of which doesn't imply we have reached a state of unbroken heavenly bliss. Often we are a disappointment to him. We fail to live up to his expectations. We may even deny him, feel ashamed to acknowledge him. But a friend is the one who knows the worst about us and loves us just the same. And he, like a faithful friend or lover whom we have let down, forgives and draws us back to himself. And that is all part and parcel of learning to abide in his love. Even though we let go this is a love that will never let go of us. and each time we return to it it deepens.

Many years ago I read a book of sermons by the Methodist preacher Leslie Weatherhead, most of it I've forgotten, except its title, *The Transforming Friendship*. All friendship, especially that of marriage, is transforming, but none more so than this friendship. Last Christmas my children were at a loss to know what to buy me. I didn't seem to need anything in particular, so I too was at a loss. Then I remembered I'd almost run out of tea cups, I only had one decent one left, I'd broken the rest. *Buy me a new tea service*, I said. They did, and according to my instructions. It was to be in plain white, on no account was it to have any colour or any other decoration. It must be entirely unadorned. I am very pleased with it. So now I can invite you round for a cup of tea and together we will consider how, if abiding human love can transform a callow, tasteless youth into a reasonably discerning man, how much more must be the transforming power of the abiding love of Jesus.