**HOMILY FOR THE WOMEN IN FELLOWSHIP SERVICE**

Wednesday 9 December 2020

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

*No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another.*

I was delighted to be able to welcome you all here to Shrewsbury Cathedral for a time of fellowship albeit under these strange circumstances of the public health emergency and COVID, and even happier to be invited to speak to you this morning and to share a few words by way of reflection on the words of the Lord in the passage that Mary Rose has kindly read for us.

When Mary Rose asked if the Cathedral might host this service it seemed a long way off, and perhaps no-one could have imagined the circumstances under which the service would be held. I must admit that when Mary Rose asked me, a year ago, if we would host the service, I had to Google the fellowship to discover more about you and your charism, your work, your association. Now, if you’ve ever used the Internet and a Search Engine like Google, you’ll know that sometimes it offers suggestions, some helpful, some not so helpful. When I Googled W.I.F. that is, Women in Fellowship, Google suggested *Did you mean WiFi*? More about how apt that is later.

When your organisation was formed over a century ago, the first generation of women came together in the circumstances not of a pandemic, but a war, the Great War, and experiencing together the pain of separation caused by the conflict between the world’s great powers, this shared anxiety and concern for each other forged friendships in the midst of battle. In 1916 they could not have known that the Armistice, bought at so high a cost by those widowed, would not yield a lasting peace, not in the spectre of War that would cast its shadow in 1939, but following the cessation of hostilities in 1918, it was a global pandemic that walk stalk the countries so recently decimated by war: now widows and widowers, orphans, were made by the Spanish ‘flu. More died in that almost two year pandemic than were killed in the 1914-1918 war. I wonder: what would they say to our own generation, and your own generation, inheritors of their original genius to forge friendships in the midst of suffering, separation, and war? What was the fellowship like for them in that first pandemic of your existence and what did they learn about the gift and nature of friendship, of compassion, of companionship?

Oftentimes it is out of, or during, suffering that the most incredible miracles happen: that someone felt unloved, is loved, that those who think themselves forgotten and remembered, a kind word, a letter out of the blue, a phone call with a voice and tone that promises a friendly conversation. The work of Women in Fellowship has for the last fifty years shown in its patronage of St Christopher’s Hospice and your generous support of those who, nearing the end of their lives, can do so surrounded by a calm and loving environment, free of all worry save the concern to be with their loved ones until the end. Whilst a good member of the fellowship would chide me at this point to recall the words of your own vision for yourselves that, *‘We are not a practical society, but a caring Fellowship providing loving and supportive friendship,’* friendship does not set limits and concern for one’s neighbour, especially those most in need, is the hallmark of friendship and the care of the Hospice by donations and support a sure sign that your association is a blessing from God to others. Happily, today we have a collection towards the work of St Christopher’s taken up as you leave the Cathedral. Please be as generous as you can be to this important work.

So we find ourselves in the midst of the second pandemic your fellowship has endured and I have no doubt that something of the genius that forged the fellowship in the tumult of the Great War only to then pass through the pandemic that followed, has left a mark upon the fellowship and transmitted a spirit of endurance, forbearance, courage, good humour, and concern for each other to our present pandemic over a century later. You are the spiritual heirs of what they planted, reaping the gifts and graces that God bestowed on them, for all grace is of course a gift, not meant for ourselves, but sown in good deeds that others may reap in due season. In the sight of heaven and in God’s Providence, He knew of both pandemics of 1918 and 2020 and perhaps He granted to that first generation of the fellowship the idea to form a society such that, a century later, you all - not even thought of in 1918 - would yourselves be sustained by the same fellowship that held so closely your predecessors in love.

To return to my Google search for a moment, *Did you mean WiFi?* was what the search engine wanted to know, but how much we have all relied on WiFi during this pandemic! What would we do without it! Even this Service is being live streamed! How many words are now familiar to us that were not, perhaps, before March? Zoom, Teams, FaceTime, Skype: all of these rely on WiFi - an invisible bond of connection that makes communication possible and sustains friendship, family, and community. WiF or WiFi? I am sure you can see the metaphor - isn’t Women in Fellowship simply that: an invisible bond of connection that makes communication possible and sustains friendship, family, and community?

St Aelred wrote a beautiful treatise On Spiritual Friendship and his words have significance for us all. He wrote, ‘*No medicine is more valuable, none more efficacious, none better suited to the cure of all our temporal ills than a friend to whom we may turn for consolation in time of trouble, and with whom we may share our happiness in time of joy.’* Indeed as the book of Proverbs tells us, ‘*A friend loves at all times, and a brother or sister is born for a time of adversity.’*

We can be consoled that the circumstances of our own time are not unknown to generations that have gone before us, indeed the very founders of this fellowship, albeit having been through adaptation and amalgamation, knew the ravages of war and the scourge of a pandemic. You follow in their footsteps not simply by the care you give one another but by sharing their spirit that faced both war and disease and sustained the bonds of friendship, of fellowship, and of love.

Let us turn then to what the Lord said in the Gospel passage that Mary Rose shared with us. This is the Lord speaking, behind closed doors, to those He loved, His closest friends, friends it is worth noting who were going to betray Him either directly - I’m thinking here of Peter and Judas - or by abandoning Him - I’m thinking here of the others, safe John who remained to the foot of the Cross, shown above me with our Lady. He calls them ‘friends’, not a casual term, but Friend was a title in the ancient world, perhaps you may have heard in literature or in the great epic ‘sword and sandal’ pictures the phrase that someone was a ‘Friend of Caesar’. Indeed, in the Gospel, the Jewish leaders accuse Pilate, who is anxious to release Our Lord, of not being a ‘Friend of Caesar’ if he dared to release Christ. So, ‘Friend’ is a title that the Lord uses and bestows on His apostles, and also on us, should we wish to receive it.

A Friend was one who had instant ‘rights of audience’. We might have heard that term from Courts where certain advocates have ‘rights of audience’ only in lower Courts and some in all Courts all the way up to the Supreme Court. The Lord is naming these weak men, who He knows will abandon Him, His Friends, with immediate and direct access to Him, without needing to plead a special cause or make a formal claim, rather they can simply go to Him. What a beautiful description of Friendship! That we can simply go to our friend, no formality is necessary, no invitation required, no necessity to have a reason at all, friendship knows no need of this.

Let us renew today our desire to be friends with Lord, with each other, such that whatever our present joys and sorrows, we might receive graces, yes for ourselves, but perhaps even for others, so that should their a pandemic one hundred years from now, members of the fellowship in the year 2120 might be sustained by our present fidelity to the Lord, by our faithfulness to each other, and by the bonds of love that our fellowship expresses.