As we approach the focus of our Golden Jubilee celebrations in a week or so’s time, there’s no doubt, is there, that this is a fantastic building? It’s one of the world’s ‘thin places’ where, down the years, countless men, women and children have caught glimpses of the glory of God.

But it has to be admitted that one of the things this building doesn’t do particularly well is what Jesus is talking to his disciples about here in John chapter 15. From the picture of the vine and the branches we learn that God intends us to enjoy a warm and close relationship with him as we bear the fruit he looks for – in a word that he wants us to experience ‘intimacy’ with him. Indeed, the ability to bear fruit that will last is impossible without this closeness of relationship with him.

There are five things about this for us to explore this morning.


The first thing to notice here are the striking parallels there are between the relationship Jesus intends us to have with him and the relationship he himself has with his heavenly Father. Verses 9-10 focus on this: ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have 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.’

Not for nothing are these words described as “utterly amazing” and “astounding” – ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you’. Jesus intends us to enjoy a similar quality of intimacy with him that enjoys with his heavenly Father. Like any worthwhile relationship, this doesn’t happen all by itself – it’s something for us to work at. That’s why Jesus tells us to ‘remain’ or ‘abide’ in his love. There’s something for us to do – and to keep on doing. What does Jesus have in mind?

He identifies two things in particular, two things which might at first sound contradictory: obedience and joy. ‘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.’ The parallel continues. Jesus remains in his Father’s love by obeying the Father’s commands. We remain in his love by obeying his commands. He doesn’t mean that he will stop loving us if we disobey him. It’s just that in order actually to experience the warmth of his love we need to stay close to him. And staying close to him is about being enthusiastic about what he is enthusiastic about and steering clear of what he steers clear of. It’s about obedience and conformity to his will.

Furthermore, despite what we might sometimes think, such obedience really is where true and lasting joy is to be found. Verse 11: ‘I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.’

Here’s what the Bible scholar Don Carson very helpfully says about this. “Every Christian who has travelled any distance in his pilgrimage knows this to be so. His deepest joy springs from periods in his life when he obeys Christ with unreserved commitment... No-one is more miserable than the Christian who for a time hedges in his obedience. He does not love sin enough to enjoy its pleasures, and he does not love Christ enough to relish holiness.”

Which leads me to wonder – to what extent is our relationship with God infused with joy? Is this being compromised by anything in which we’ve been holding out on God and refusing to obey him? In which case, here’s the call to put things right and ask the Lord to restore to us the joy of his salvation.

2. VERSES 12-13: SHARED WITH OTHERS: THE SCOPE OF INTIMACY
A second aspect of the intimacy Jesus intends us to have with him is the fact that it depends on our relationships with others. Like the spokes on a bicycle wheel, we can’t get closer to the hub without also getting closer to one another.

This is what Jesus is saying in verses 12-13: ‘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.’ The same note comes again in verse 17: ‘I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.’

In other words, it would be no good our working to build up our relationship with Jesus first with the intention of trying to fit our brothers and sisters into the equation later on. The two things belong together. As John tells us in his first epistle: ‘...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.’ (1 John 4:20). If we desire what God desires for us – a greater degree of intimacy with him – we probably need to start with the Christian brother or sister we find it difficult to get on with!

A man went to the minister if his church to say that he felt there was a lack of friendliness among members of the congregation and that people were reluctant to greet one another in church. The minister agreed with him and said that he had devised a plan to change things. The next Sunday, the minister described the situation to the congregation and said that the following Sunday they would have a brief pause to allow members of the congregation to turn to those seated behind them and greet them with a friendly hello. After the service, the same man turned around to the woman behind him and said, “Good morning.” She looked at him in shocked indignation and snapped back, “That doesn’t start till NEXT Sunday!”

The thing is that the healthy church will always have a generous sprinkling of people just like that – people specially designed by God and put in place for us not necessarily to like or find congenial or enjoy talking to – but simply to love...

3. VERSES 14-15: FRIENDSHIP: THE DEPTH OF INTIMACY

A third aspect of the intimacy Jesus intends us to have with him is that he calls us his friends. This is in verses 14-15: ‘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, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.’

Notice the way round this is. I can be a friend of Jesus. But he does not say that he is a friend of mine. In fact, although we have hymns like ‘What a Friend we have in Jesus’, the Bible never actually says that God or Jesus is anybody’s ‘friend’. Why? Because this is a very special kind of friendship. It’s quite different from the friendship we might have with anybody else.

Imagine what would happen if you or I went around saying ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you.’. It’s not an approach which would be very successful! But that’s because you’re you and I’m me! Jesus is rather different. It’s part of the glory of who he is that he can – indeed, that he must – say things like this. ‘You are my friends if you do what I command you.’ To be a friend like that may not sound very different from being a servant. But it is. ‘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, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.’

Here comes the note of intimacy again. A servant simply does as he is told without necessarily understanding why or how what he is doing fits into the overall scheme of things. But a friend has been let in on what is going on. As the friends of Jesus, we have the privilege of knowing what he is up to and where we fit in.

4. VERSE 16a: HIS CHOICE: THE SOURCE OF INTIMACY

A fourth aspect of the intimacy Jesus intends us to have with him is an awareness of where the initiative for such a relationship comes from. Verse 16: ‘You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...’

This is a vital truth to get hold of. After all, in thinking that we’re supposed to be enjoying a relationship of close intimacy with the King of kings and Lord of lords, how do we know that we’re not just kidding ourselves? Are not
thoughts like this just monumentally impertinent? Well, they would be if we had decided to take the lead in bringing this wonderful relationship into being. But we didn’t. There’s immense security in the way that Jesus reassures his disciples: ‘You did not choose me but I chose you’. When we’re tempted to think that we are getting a bit above ourselves by thinking that God wants this sort of close relationship with him, here’s the wonderful assurance that it was his idea not ours!

5. VERSE 16b: ANSWERED PRAYER: THE RESULT OF INTIMACY

A fifth and final aspect of the intimacy Jesus intends us to have with him is this amazing privilege of answered prayer. Here’s the second half of verse 16: ‘...the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.’ It’s important, isn’t it, to make sure we get the whole of that sentence. It’s a mercy for us, probably, and certainly for others, that Jesus doesn’t just say ‘the Father will give you whatever you ask him!’ No, it’s qualified by the three words ‘in my name’. The Father will give us whatever we ask that is in accord with what the name of Jesus stands for. The Father will give us whatever we ask that follows the lead of Jesus in seeking his glory. The Father will give us whatever we ask that Jesus himself would be happy to ask for. While that may limit us a little, it still offers plenty of scope!

The message of this chapter is that God intends that our fruitfulness, our being effective and useful for him, comes from keeping close to Jesus. An intimacy that reflects Jesus’ own relationship with the Father. An intimacy that has to be expressed in love for others as well. An intimacy that means being his friends and knowing what he is up to. An intimacy that is securely based on the fact that he chose us well before we got around to choosing him. And an intimacy which is expressed through effective and powerful prayer. May God help us as we make it our goal to live in the light of this chapter and draw closer to him. Amen.