

In the name of one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well good morning, St. James. It is a great joy for me to be here with you today. Yesterday Charles III was crowned king of England as you may know, in a lavish spectacle, the kind of spectacle the English are so good at.

Now perhaps, unfortunately, perhaps distressingly to your rector, it happened amidst various kinds of controversy in the UK. There seems to be less affection for Charles than for his mother. There are fewer Commonwealth countries interested in continuing to be a part of the empire. There is controversy over Charles's immense wealth, which may be as much as a billion pounds according to various articles I've read on the internet, so they must be true.

Although they're not sure how to value the fact that Charles owns all the swans in Britain, and there's controversy about whether this immense royal spectacle is worth it in a time of economic hardship for some. In one controversial innovation in the part of the ceremony where people take vows of allegiance to the new monarch, there is a place where hereditary peers of the realm have traditionally taken an oath of allegiance on behalf of the common people. So your Lord or Lady would take the oath of allegiance on your behalf.

The ceremony was updated to invite anyone who wanted to take the vow to go ahead and take it, removing the middleman. Charles probably intended this innovation as a democratic approach, apparently imagining millions of people all over England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and all the Commonwealth countries taking a vow that brings them all together as one. But it has caused some consternation, including a Guardian article, which Mark tells me I should never read The Guardian, but I click on things. A Guardian article I read quoting people saying things like, "You must be joking", and "I think he's shot himself in the foot," and so forth. The nicest comment they quoted was a man who called himself a "royalist lite" who said, "I might join in if the mood strikes

me." Showing how something that was intended to bring people together in community comes down in a highly individualistic society, like ours are in the modern West, like a lead balloon.

Which reminds me of a conversation I had this week in an organization I serve about how to ensure the wellbeing of all people in the community. It made me think, how do we, living in today's very individualistic society, work toward wellbeing in the church? The conversation in that organization was about the wellbeing of individuals in that organization, but it led me to wonder whether that is what we are really about as a church.

Now, certainly I am in the church because I see how it increases my personal well-being and that of others. It gives each person a connection to God. It helps every person meet others and feel like a part of something bigger. It connects everyone to ultimate meaning and purpose. It deepens our prayer and spiritual life. It brings comfort that death is not the end of life, but only the beginning of a new kind of life. It gives each of us a mission outside of ourselves. Each person benefits from life in Christ. They grow and they change. Being a Christian, a member of the body of Christ is truly individually life transforming.

Yet in the church, I don't think that we are here ultimately for individual wellbeing, even though each of us benefits personally in some way from being here. I think we do what we do in the church for the sake of the wider community, for the whole church, for the whole human race, ultimately for the whole creation, which is a God-given mission that requires each of us to give, to sacrifice, to serve. Think about it, individuals may enter the church because it benefits us personally. But from the time we enter, we are taught to look outside ourselves, to give of ourselves for the sake of others, to join together and form a community that is dedicated to the wellbeing of the world around us.

The mid-20th century Archbishop William Temple, archbishop of Canterbury, was quoted as saying,

"The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." As we grow in faith, we recognize that the purpose of our life in Christ is not simply a matter of individual salvation, but of offering the gifts that we have been given for the sake of God and for the sake of our neighbor, including ultimately the gift of love, love that binds us together as a community of faith that then reaches out to others and invites them in, and love that serves the world around us for the sake of the God who not only brings us together, but sends us out again.

In other words, we are here not simply to enjoy good music, good sermons, interesting teaching, a community of nice people, not just to savor the promise of individual salvation, we are here to proclaim that Good News to others, through our words and our actions. And we are here to form a community of faith that is dedicated to loving God and loving our neighbors. Ultimately, we realize that Christian faith is not about individual wellbeing, but about contributing to the wellbeing, in other words, the salvation, of the entire world.

The salvation of the entire world is a theme that runs through the Gospel of John. John has a lot to say that could be considered exclusive and inward focused. For instance, today's statement: "Nobody comes to the Father except through me." But then John also has a lot to say that seems very clearly to indicate that God's love encompasses the whole world. For instance, the famous John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life" is followed immediately by John 3:17: "For God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." That could be a puzzling passage.

Today's Gospel passage can be puzzling too. What is Jesus saying here? What are these dwelling places that Jesus is going ahead to prepare for us? What is eternal life? What is salvation? What did Jesus believe He came into the world to do, and what did He believe that he was accomplishing through His death? What does it mean that Jesus is

the way, the truth and the life? How can one person, even Jesus, be all these things and what does it mean for us?

Well, today's Gospel from John is a good place to start with these questions. In Easter season, we talk about resurrection, and we read about various experiences of the resurrected Christ, and we think about what those mean for us. But here, in the fifth Sunday of Easter, we go back in time before Jesus' death on the cross, in order that what He does in this Gospel can help us grow in awareness of what the Resurrection means for us.

So, in this Gospel, it is the night before Jesus dies. He is at dinner with His friends, and He seems to realize everything the disciples don't know and starts telling them all the important things as if it's His last night on earth, which it is. The first thing to know is, this is an intimate gathering of friends. Jesus knows these people through and through and they know Him, or they think they do, although He's getting ready to give them quite a surprise. These are Jesus's last words to His disciples, words spoken to people He loves dearly and who will need hope and confidence to get them through the next few days, and then through the years that follow, when they will need every ounce of courage to tell the Good News of His resurrection and talk about what it means for us.

The things that He tells them in today's story give them what they need: hope and confidence that Jesus's death will not be the end, and neither will theirs. Jesus knows that He is ascending to the heart of God and He knows that His friends who are connected to Him through an indissoluble bond, the same kind of bond that we share with Jesus in our baptism, they will be so deeply connected to Him that they will have an open, unbreakable invitation to join Him there at the hand of the Father in eternal life. Death need never again be something to fear.

The words of comfort that He speaks to His friends take us straight to the heart of our faith. They tell us that we have nothing to fear either, that God's love for us is stronger than death, and that we have

life eternal awaiting us through Jesus because we are His beloved disciples just as much as the friends gathered together at the Last Supper.

How do we join Jesus in His promise of eternal life? I'm convinced that Jesus's promise is not only about something that happens someday after death, any more than I think the only purpose of Christian life is to buy us an individual ticket to heaven. I believe that Jesus's promise is about our life starting now and continuing on through death to eternity. Jesus says that He is the way and the truth and the life. He doesn't say that He's the afterlife. He says He's the life right now. To join Jesus in His way, His life, we need to know Him, to follow Him, to do the things He did, to join Him in His mission to love this world and to reveal God's love for it.

That's why we come to church, to be renewed in our knowledge of Jesus so that we can reveal Jesus to others. Which means that as we grow in faith, we grow in love for others. And increasingly as we are slowly transformed to be more and more Christlike, we act in love for the sake of others, for the sake of the world God loves. For Christians, living the life of Christ is not a moment in time, it is a journey, a way, where every step we take is accompanied by the Christ who loves us and who calls us to become more and more like Him, giving ourselves for the sake of others.

We might say, "Become like Him? We can't possibly be like Him. We're ordinary human beings." But look what Jesus says, "The one who believes in me will also do the works I do, and in fact will do greater works than these." It's an astounding declaration. Jesus has faith in us. We're used to being told that we need to have faith in Him, but listen to this, He has faith in us. He believes that He has given us everything we need to do the things that He does and more, to share the love of God with a world that so needs love.

Jesus believes in us. He believes we can be like Him, like Jesus, the one who loves us, who heals us, who teaches us, who gives Himself utterly and completely for us. That loving service and self-

giving is in the very nature of God. As Christians, the way we follow calls us to imitate that love and self-giving, to sacrifice and serve on His behalf, to live the same way Jesus did, not perfectly but the best we can, always trusting Him to love us so completely that death can never triumph over God's love.

Our baptism is the connection, the oath of allegiance, so to speak, that connects us to Jesus. In a minute, we'll renew our baptismal vows. And as you hear these words and renew your own vows, you'll see. Our baptism is the promise that leads us from acting as individuals for our own benefit, to committed Christians who take vows to act for the sake of others, because of our love for God and our neighbor.

We may never own all the swans in England, and I'm pretty sure we wouldn't want to, but we have a greater inheritance. We have the faith of Jesus who believes in us and sends us out to be the body of Christ, proclaiming the Good News of Christ in our words and with our actions for the love and the wellbeing of the world. Thanks be to God.