

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

So, here we are. Standing together at the turning of a page. In fact, we stand here as several pages are turned at a similar time. We have the turn of the Winter into Spring, the turn of the Church calendar from ordinary time into Lent, and of course, the turn of the page on our chapter together here on The Roseland. Quite appropriately, then, we have heard a Gospel reading which also marked the turning of a page in the life of Jesus Christ. A moment when the disciples saw a change in mood, a shift in direction, and a divine introduction to the next chapter of Jesus' story. This talk of pages, and chapters, and stories, is the theme of what I'd like to share with you this morning.

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child, and I think I can now probably state with some certainty that it has taken a whole peninsula to raise this priest. For those of you who may be wondering what on earth is going on; I came here nearly three years ago to finish my training as a priest and today that chapter of my story draws a to a close, because tomorrow I head off to take my new parish in East Sussex.

Three years isn't a very long time really, but I was reminded the other day that it is less about duration and more about depth, less about quantity and more about quality. So, I have been thinking about what I will take away with me from the depth and the quality of our time here together, and this morning I would most like to thank you all for inviting me into your lives and sharing with me your stories. In all the interactions, the exchanges, the secrets, the laughs, and even the painful bits, I have learned how to be a priest and more importantly, I have learned what the church is for.

If the walls could speak and the ground could utter, there would be told here thousands of stories. Stories and characters form the steadfast history of this church, long lines of families and people who have had their important moments in this building, who have walked through these doors to pray, to sing, to cry, to give thanks, and to stand in awe. This church belongs to none of us and yet all of us, and it has been such a privilege to be able to stand holding her door wide open – both literally and metaphorically - for a little while.

You have taught me that priests are entrusted with stories of pure gold. Every conversation contains treasure, whether shared outside the co-op, here in the vestry, over the craft table at youth club, or even in the pub. Stories and experiences that make up the tapestry and narrative of this place, that shape the fabric of this community, that shape the place in which we live.

Thank you for showing me how very important it is to listen, to carefully find creative and compassionate response, and to then go away and keep you all in prayer. No priest ever undertakes this alone and true enough this church community with many years of practicing faith, charity and prayer, has done and will continue to do so for many years to come.

The church does this because her primary purpose is to hear, to live, and to share in God's story. 'Listen to him' says God in the Gospel this morning by which he asks us to allow our lives to be defined by his enduring, eternal, and enlightening love.

A love which allows us to change and grow.

A love which transforms and awakens.

A love which is the mystery of faith.

You may have thought you were walking into an old church building this morning, but actually you have walked into a living school for love. A place, where we acknowledge the common struggles in being human. Where we try to honour our common bonds. To greater or lesser degrees we all struggle with the mistakes we make, the losses we endure, the pains we carry. We all wrestle, and worry, and try to work out what it means to be upon this earth. But we also share in our seeking and yearning for joy, and peace, and love, and hope.

We are all in this together, and here in this school of love, God's story in this church, is a community of equality, where we can ask for God to help us and guide us in our living and loving. A community where we all are welcomed and invited by name.

In all the stories that you have shared with me as your priest, all the events you have invited me to walk alongside you in, and in all the struggles you have shared, the prayers I've been asked to pray, I have learnt to recognize one universal fact.

You are each uniquely and perfectly loved, created in the image of God.

You are personally invited to draw up the mountain to witness that love, to have your vision changed, to have your view on the world enhanced, to have your capacity to love and be loved expanded. 'Come and listen' is an invitation still given even if **you** were the only person on earth. And this church community offers you a place to have your hair-stand-on-end in mysterious moments, a place to ask your deepest questions, have your heart warmed, your mistakes forgiven, and your hopes renewed.

I have learnt here that there are many levels of believing, and many levels of belonging, and that this God has broad enough shoulders and a huge enough heart to welcome you all in just as you are. This church belongs to none of us, and yet all of us.

The bible is full of stories of transitions and the turning of pages in the long history of God's people. It is the way of faith as we have heard this morning, and I shall treasure the chapter I have had with all of you here.

Through each of you, God has inspired my hopefulness for humanity, has enriched my faith, and has shaped me into the sort of priest He has called me to be. My heart is bursting with gratitude. Thank you very much for welcoming me, William, Milo, Jasper and Amelie, to be here among you.

And as this page turns, and we all prepare to embrace a new chapter, a new season, and a new adventure, I pray that we will all remember and know our place in God's story of an enduring, eternal and enlightening love.

I shall end my sermon with this simple poem entitled Real Love.

Real love, long love,
pure love, strong love

God's love, true love
deep love, full love

Great love, this love
my love, His love.

Real Love, by Janice Nutley

Amen