**9th May 2021**

Call to worship

Jesus said: ‘No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’
So, let us join together as friends, Jesus’ friends,
to worship and serve the one who,
because of his great love, gave his all for us.



A gathering prayer

Lord Jesus, we come from separate houses,
from one street and another.
We may have come with others,
we may have come alone;
but we all come as neighbours and friends.
We come as different but equal.
We come to worship you, our ‘Ultimate Friend’,
and to commit ourselves afresh
to one another and to you.
Amen.



A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

Dear Lord, your love is so precious;
but we have turned away from you when our lives have been easy
– forgive us and help us to turn back to you.

You have commanded us to love others;
but we have turned away from them when their lives have been difficult
– forgive us and help us to be there for them.
You have shared with us your ministry of welcome;
but we have turned people away
– forgive us and help us always to be open to them.
For the sake of Jesus, whose life and death, deeds and words have saved us.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

God of hope and healing:
for choosing us – we thank you.
For trusting us – we thank you.
For befriending us – we thank you.
For empowering us – we thank you.
For loving us – we thank you.
And for forgiving, redeeming and blessing us –
we thank you, in Jesus’ name.
Amen.

**John 15.9-17**

**Sermon \*Contains spoilers\***

13 million people tuned in for the result of six series’ worth of AC12’s anti-corruption investigations: the uncovering of ‘H’, or ‘the fourth man’. Styled as a bit of a supervillain he was actually revealed as a rather poorly dressed, dim-witted, even gormless, DSI with a Brummie accent![[1]](#endnote-1)

Over nine years,*Line of Duty* has taken viewers through acronyms to test even the super fan, ‘bent coppers’ wheedled out of the woodwork and into prison (or witness protection), car chases, grisly murders, plot twists and enough drama to keep us on our toes to the very end of each series.

As the credits of series six rolled, many fans were left disappointed and underwhelmed. Viewers didn’t get the supervillain they wanted.

But in many ways writer Jed Mercurio has masterfully created a window into culture, society and humanity so argued Rev Jules Middleton in a reflection I read this week. Far from the escapism many of us seek in our Sunday night viewing, he has made us feel uncomfortable. Evil supervillains may be the stuff of Disney and Netflix but humanity’s brokenness might lead any one of us to a decision where we feel we have no choice - perhaps that is closer to the reality some of us live in?

When quizzed on the finale, Mercurio himself noted in an interview with the podcast ‘Obsessed with… Line of Duty’ that he wanted to make a point about how someone can do a lot of harm without necessarily being a mastermind.

Reminiscent of the usually mislabelled quote: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”, many Christian commentators have picked up on this theme, with several citing the ‘banality of evil’ (a phrase coined by Hannah Arendt, political theorist in 1961) reflecting that evil acts aren’t necessarily done by ‘evil people’ but led by the systems in which they find themselves; or we might add because of their own life’s circumstances. Coined by political theorist Hannah Arendt after watching the 1961 trial of Nazi SS officer Adolf Eichmann, this spare phrase captures the idea that **evil** acts are not necessarily perpetrated by **evil** people. Instead, they can simply be the result of bureaucrats dutifully obeying orders thoughtlessly.

Mercurio has given us characters who are flawed in ways that many of us might relate to. Even our hero Supt Ted (Jesus, Mary joseph and the wee donkey) Hastings left us with an ethical dilemma as he ‘misdirected’ thousands of pounds to support a young widow, while also assuaging his own conscience.

Most of us won’t be drawn into criminal gangs or murder, but we’ve all faced temptations. Have we been those who have stood by and done nothing when we’ve witnessed wrongdoing?

Evil is all of those things that thrive in an absence of God’s presence.

In the end, the villain we’d been looking for was a guy with little integrity or care; who was fed by simple greed; and who turned a blind eye to what was going on around him. Perhaps the finale of season six made us face the reality that evil is less obvious than we might think, and we simply didn’t like it?

In contrast, in our bible passage, that continues on where we left off last week, Jesus encourages the disciples to keep his commandments – that is our line of duty - and, above all, to love one another as he loved them. He says that those who do this are his friends and he emphasizes that this is his choice rather than theirs.

What does friendship mean? What does ‘loving one another after the example of Jesus’ means in practice. How does this stop us from falling into the banality of evil?

What kinds of friendships do you have? Perhaps you are a friend of a local community group – a theatre group or wildlife conservation project or something like that. If you use Facebook, you probably get many people asking you to be their friend. [[2]](#endnote-2)You might, by virtue of belonging to the organization, be a ‘Friend of the Earth’. Some will still be in touch with a few friends from school, even if that was a long time ago and you haven’t seen those friends in person for years. Perhaps you meet up once a week (or more) with friends at the pub or in the coffee shop, or at weekends you might have a group of friends with whom you go to watch your favourite sports team. Perhaps there are other ways, other contexts, in which the word friend crops up. If you included them all, can you count how many friends you have? It is a difficult ask; probably impossible.

Some of these friendships are deep and lasting; others come and go. In some – for most of us, with those few people that we would describe as our ‘best friends’ – there may be a deep and mutual understanding of who we are, a sharing of confidences, a true love and respect for one another. In others, there may be little more than a temporary convenience – friends for now.

Without doubt there are many different kinds of friendship. So, let us take a few moments to think about friendship with Jesus. What kind of friendship do you have with Jesus? What kind of friend is he? What kind of friend do we want him to be? And, since friendship is by its very nature, mutual, reciprocal: what kind of friend do you think Jesus wants us to be? And are we? And if not, what can we do about it?

What is the depth of friendship we know with other friends of Jesus? Some people go out of their way to make time to make good friendships with people in the church. Others keep themselves to themselves. It is your choice. But like the simple saying goes – to have a friends you need to eb a friend. So what you put in to friendships is usually what you get out. Pandemic and the isolation it has brought has made many people reflect on their lives and what they spend their time on. Friendships are precious and worth spending time on. There is another saying that no one on their death bed says, “I wish I spent more time in the office’.

One of our challenges, having been isolated for most of the year and in person meetings being difficult, is to try and rebuild a sense of belonging, community, friendship in the coming months. We hope to be able to arrange a few events soon and encourage people to re-engage.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, once commented that ‘We are all on the receiving end of the same grace.’ Being part of a Christian community, sharing together in Christian worship, is a great equalizer. Each one of us is chosen by God. We are all God’s adopted children – with the same status in God’s eyes. We have no more – and no less – right to be part of the worshipping community than anyone else. Sometimes we might, in the traditions of our churches or the words of our worship, act is if this were not so – as if some had a special status of some sort. But it is not true – we are all beloved by God and befriended by Jesus.

In John 15.9-17 Jesus calls his followers his friends and assures his followers of his love for them. [[3]](#endnote-3)Jesus is a friend who shares his life and joy with us, and shares with us what matters to him: love. We can show active love for our friends in many ways. But Jesus also showed love to the people on the edges of society, those with extra struggles. The love of Jesus was not just for those who are friends but also for enemies. Love was sacrificial.

This week newspapers published the name of the young man who died trying to save a woman who fell into the river Thames, Folajimi Olubunmi-Adewole. Stories like this are vivid illustrations of the love Jesus describes ‘to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’. We aren’t often called to make this kind of sacrifice, but this young man clearly felt a love for other people that compelled him to act, even at the risk of his own life.

Similarly sacrificial love is being shown all over India as healthy family members have stopped work in order to search for oxygen and unoccupied hospital beds for relatives suffering from Covid. The latest wave of Coronavirus in India has been overwhelming, and the absence of universal healthcare means that it is for family members to source and obtain whatever is needed for those they love.

Recent news has reported UK charities facing a ‘perfect storm’ of hugely increased need for their services due to the impact of the pandemic, along with an expected dramatic fall in donations. Many hard-up households are having to cut back on their giving.

This week sees the start of Christian Aid week. They do valuable work in some of the poorest communities of the world, communities that don’t have the resources we have had to fight coronavirus and that have been devastated. The call of the love of Jesus is to lift our eyes form our immediate needs, and form those of our ‘friends’ but also to realize that we are part of a larger friendship across the world.

Last year I walked 300,000 steps to raise the 6K that our community normally raise for Christian Aid. But I’ve done my foot in this month – plantar fasciitis for those who know how painful it is. So, I won’t be walking. There is a great water walk you can use linking in with the theme of the week – about how people in developing world have to walk miles just for the essentials of water. We are delivering envelopes to people’s doors, but with the covid concerns they are delivery only envelopes – you don’t need to go back and collect them in and asks for money. The pessimist in me believes that we will only get a fraction of the donations we would normally, knowing how hard it is to part people with their cash. If we get a quarter of the funds we usually do I think we will have done well. However, if we do four times as many streets – then…. Please consider whether you could give half an hour this week to deliver envelopes to your street.

Jesus urges us to love one another with a love that is inherently sacrificial. Jesus’ command is not an easy one and there are always pragmatic justifications for looking after our own needs first - as individuals as well as nations - but Jesus’ way of love produces fruit that lasts. What we lose on a human level by giving other people’s needs a priority, we gain back more through our relationship with the Father who ‘will give you whatever you ask him in my name’ (John 15.16)

Our Line of Duty, our command is to love one another. Instead of doing a lot of harm without necessarily being a mastermind, as H was revealed last Sunday, we can do a lot of good without being some super hero or great leader. Instead of the banality of evil, we can have the extraordinary acts of love.

Prayers of intercession

*A suitable response can be used between the bidding, e.g.*God of love,
hear our prayer.

God of love, friend to those in power,
with the local elections this week we are reminded of the privilege we have in being able to engage in democracy and vote. Whatever our political leanings, we pray for those who have retained or gained places on our local councils. May they be diligent in working for the communities they serve, passionate about improving the lives of others, and open to listening to views different from their own. Equip *all*of our political representatives with the gifts of thoughtfulness, grace and integrity.

God of love, friend to those in pain,
we look at the situation unfolding in India and continue to feel despair for those who are ill and dying and for those grieving for loved ones. We pray for the urgent supplies India needs to arrive quickly. We pray for more oxygen, medicine and vaccines. May countries who have plenty be generous in their response to the crisis. Please bring the people of India some signs of improvement and some signs of hope.

God of love, friend of our friends,
thank you for the gift of friendship. Thank you for the people who bring fun and joy into our lives. Thank you for the warmth friends bring. Thank you that we can once again see those we love and enjoy their company. Despite the pain and struggle this year has wrought we thank you for the friends that have helped us, stuck by us, cheered us up, listened and sympathised and helped us cope. Bless our friends and help us to look to Jesus to learn how to deepen our friendships and live the life of love he modelled.



A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus, we rejoice
that you have chosen us to be your friends.
Help us to be a friend to you by obeying your commands.
As we go out into your world,
help us to live a life that reflects your love,
by being a friend to others.
Amen.

1. [**Rev Jules Middleton**](https://www.premierchristianity.com/rev-jules-middleton/1250.bio)Rev Jules Middleton is a vicar in the Church of England, author, wife, mum, lover of Jesus and the sea - not necessarily in that order. She writes at pickingapplesofgold.com and tweets @redjules <https://www.premierchristianity.com/line-of-duty-may-have-felt-underwhelming-but-its-commentary-on-the-nature-of-evil-was-spot-on/4328.article> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/113-may-june-2021-b/easter-6/explore-and-respond> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Steve Taylor is joint-vicar of*[*St James Alperton*](http://stjamesalperton.org.uk/)*(CofE) near Wembley. He shares the job with his wife, Ali, and shares his house with their two daughters, two cats, a hamster and a lonely fish.*

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/113-may-june-2021-b/easter-6/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)