

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

SUNDAY 26 OCTOBER 2025



ST SAVIOUR'S CHALK FARM

St Saviours Vicarage, Eton Rd, Chalk Farm,
London NW3 4SU

ROMANS 15: 1-6

LUKE 4: 16-24 and 28-30

Our Gospel Reading which we have just heard is headlined in most Bibles as "The Rejection of Jesus." It starts in rather a benign way. At first the congregation in his hometown of Nazareth seem rather impressed by Jesus – a local boy turned preacher. But by the time we get to the end of the Reading, we can see how unpleasant and, indeed, brutal, His rejection was by His home synagogue.

At around the halfway point in Jesus's sermon, the congregation seemed to get restless. They were starting to grumble with negative and rather cynical comments like: "Is this not Joseph's son?".

Perhaps local snobbery might have something to do with it. Even though Jesus had preached a brilliant, if somewhat provocative, sermon, perhaps there were voices from the posh pews saying things like:

"He's only a carpenter's boy."

"How dare he suggest that the spirit of the Lord is upon me!"

Or that "Today the Scripture has been fulfilled".

And by the time we get to the end of Luke's account of what happened that day at Nazareth, the grumbling has grown into violent hostility towards Jesus.

Let me remind you how Luke describes it: ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

You could not have a more brutal rejection of Jesus in His hometown. It must have caused great pain and sadness to him.

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Most of us, in our lives, have felt the pain of rejection. Perhaps we've been rejected in love or in a family relationship. Perhaps we have been rejected in our work life. Politicians – and I used to be one – frequently get rejected by the electorate or fired from their position as Ministers.

"You're just not up to the job," Prime Minister Clement Atlee used to tell the Ministers who he was sacking.

But much less dramatically, at all levels, people can feel rejected when they go un-thanked and unappreciated. Or perhaps when they quietly slip off into retirement when they feel they've still got plenty to offer, then they can have a sense of being unwanted – or even of being rejected.

Now I'm sorry to say that our own beloved Church of England can be a major sinner in this sensitive area of premature departures leading to a feeling of rejection.

Some decades ago, when longevity and health were not as good as they are today, the Synod of the Church of England passed a rule saying that every Vicar, and even every Bishop, had to retire from the Church of England at 70.

And so, to this day, far too many Clergy, still more or less at the height of their powers, and perhaps fuller than ever with the spiritual wisdom that grows with age, are pushed into compulsory retirement.

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"Theirs not to reason why," as Tennyson puts it in his poem on *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

But many observers, including this one who, ironically, was ordained at the age of 75, entirely within the rules because I am a voluntary, non-stipendiary Priest, think that far too much spiritual, theological and pastoral

talent goes wasted by the "70 years and your out" compulsory retirement rule.

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Now some of you may be wondering why on earth our guest preacher is banging on about the Church of England's ageist retirement rules.

Well it's because, as they say, "every cloud can have a silver lining".

And such a silver lining is coming to you, the congregation of St Saviour's Chalk Farm. For you are about to become unexpected beneficiaries of the Church of England's retirement rules. And that's because in about 12 weeks' time, the present Vicar of St Matthew's Westminster, Father Philip Chester, is about to become your new Priest in Charge here at St Saviour's.

Now, having known Fr Philip Chester well for over 50 years, first as a member of his congregation and then for the last eight years as a member of his Clergy Team, I thought you might be interested if I offered you what is called in Hollywood "a short biopic" of Fr Philip ahead of his licensing here in January.

I will begin by saying that you as a congregation at St Saviour's are extremely well-blessed for having chosen, with the help of your Archdeacon, Fr Philip to be the Priest in Charge at St Saviour's.

I can vividly remember the first time I ever met Fr Philip. The year was 1974. I was a newly elected, young MP and he was an even younger Priest and Hospital Chaplain.

He was on duty as a Preacher at St Margaret's Westminster which I was attending because it was the Parliamentary Church, strategically located between the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

Philip preached that Sunday on the story of the Water into Wine miracle at Cana in Galilee as told in Chapter 2 of St John's Gospel.

He gave such a good sermon, with touches of humour, touches of theology, and an inspirational spiritual message at its core, that I did something unusual. I wrote Philip a letter of congratulations and that letter led to a meeting which started a friendship which has endured and flourished for over 50 years.

Early in this period, Fr Philip moved to St Matthew's Westminster. It was a church on its last legs. Its congregation was down to single figures, riven with small feuds and factions. The Bishop of London, Bishop Hope, wanted to close it. But he was impressed by entreaties from the young Fr Philip to try to keep St Matthew's open.

So the Bishop said: "All right – I'll give you a year."

And in that year, Philip got rid of the in-fighting, doubled the size of the congregation, preached the Gospel, and faithfully honoured the Anglo Catholic tradition. St Matthew's flourishes today after 40 years of his incumbency. Praise the Lord!

Among the qualities I should mention about Fr Philip is his loving inclusivity. He will encourage St Saviour's to grow as a church which in Cranmer's phrase, welcomes "all sorts and conditions of men" – and women – including, and perhaps especially, those going through hard times of "trouble, sickness, need or any other adversity".

As an example of this, I should mention that Fr Philip visited me in prison six times in seven months when I was serving my sentence for perjury. So I for one, well know what a fine Pastor, Preacher and Priest is coming your way.

I do believe that, after a long period of being sheep without a shepherd, you at St Saviour's could not be more blessed by having Fr Philip as your new Priest in Charge. Right now, Fr Philip is at the top of his form.

He is preaching this Sunday in New York at a famous Episcopalian Church on 5th Avenue on the occasion of the visit by the Choir of St Matthew's to sing the Choral Eucharist – Mozart's *Missa Brevis*.

But if that sounds wonderfully joyful – and it is – Fr Philip has asked me to mention to you that in recent days he has had to pass through a deep valley of shock and sadness.

Only a few days ago, our brilliantly talented and much-loved 22-year-old Pastoral Assistant at St Matthew's, Keelan, committed suicide in his room in the church. Fr Philip, with the police, had to open the door of the room and cut down Keelan's hanging body. Needless to say, this tragic episode has shocked Fr Philip to the core of his being. And on top of this, a day or two later, he had to suffer another bereavement of a close member of his own family. Of course, being a strong and faithful Priest, Philip will cope with these sorrows.

But I suspect the reason he wanted me to share his great sadnesses with you is in the hope that you will understand him better and pray for him more fervently when he starts his journey with you as your Priest in Charge early next year.

Martin Luther once wrote: "It is in our pain and in our brokenness that we can come closest to Christ."

Just as Jesus must have felt sad and even broken when he had to leave Nazareth. So, perhaps, Fr Philip may have some of the same painful feelings as he retires from St Matthew's and leaves in a few days' time.

Yet the last words of our Reading today, about Jesus, are: "But He passed through the midst of them and went on His way."

And He went on His way to give His followers the most amazing Ministry the world has ever known.

I pray, and I ask you to pray, that Fr Philip's new Ministry here in Chalk Farm may be as loving and as fruitful and as inspirational as it has been in Westminster.

So please welcome him well.

With God's blessing, may St Saviour's enjoy a new era of love, joy and peace under Fr Philip's leadership.

AMEN