From the gospel of John, Chapter 15,

“As the Father loves me, so I love you. Abide in my love”

A friend, whom I love, once told me (and others) a story from his childhood. He was with his grand-parents on Anglesea, in Wales. He had gone with them to their chapel for a festival of hymn singing known as a “Cymanfa Ganu”

The festival was well under way when there was a power failure, the lights went out and the packed chapel – all 200 folks were plunged into complete darkness.

There was, he said, no exclamation, no pause, not a giggle, not a hesitation. The 200 folks just went on, he said, they went on, singing in the dark.

This story and the image of 200 people confidently, without a fuss, singing in the dark has stayed with me every day since he told me the story.

It has stayed with me I think because of what he said to us about why the story mattered to him.

He said that those who went on singing, could do so because it did not matter to them whether they could see the words written down. The words were not just something they saw and read but also something they believed deeply and something written on their hearts – they were gathered together as a community, they gave each other confidence, together they knew the words by heart, together they believed, and were strengthened and so they kept on singing whatever happened.

Discipleship is a working out in practice of our baptismal promises that we have turned to Christ, and will keep turning to Christ. As disciples we accept our relationship with God is one of love and then seek to sustain it and be nurtured in it. God's gracious offer of love to us is therefore simultaneously a challenge. If God is committed to us, are we prepared to accept that as reality and commit ourselves in return to God? Even if we do choose to accept it, can we manage to live out our commitment adequately, frail and human as we are? Can we live confidently in and thru Christ and keep singing in the dark and the light?   
  
The New Testament suggests that as disciples we join the group of those seeking to follow the way of Jesus, we respond to God's challenge to seek life with him and begin to share his relationship with God as Father. As a group of disciples, this leads to his Spirit bubbling up in us as individuals, encouraging and enabling us to live out our side of the relationship.

It may now be February but I imagine you still remember pulling the Christmas crackers and comparing the useless gifts (at least in our house) and the even more useless cracker jokes. Every year the Cameron family ask without fail,

What did you get?

My family say it every year- as if one year, despite everything we know they will be worth having or worth laughing at.

Life lived in God, life lived for God is not one giant lottery or Christmas cracker – we shouldn’t be looking around enviously seeing what every else got.

In our discipleship we are being asked to renew our openness to sharing in Christ’s life and participating in the life and mission of God, whatever that holds. We live in uncertain times. On the Tuesday evening of the first Brexit vote I was attending a service in the chapel of St Marys Undercroft in the House of Commons. As I queued for security to enter the House of Commons Apache helicopters flew overhead monitoring the protests outside Parliament.

Why the story of the chapel folks singing in the dark matters to me is that they knew that worship of God did not depend on the conditions, for them, being conducive for praise. The worship of God goes on, in the light and in the dark, when life is exciting and when it is dreadful and we suffer all kinds of losses and uncertainties. God is God, God’s love continues to be poured out generously and abundantly, freely and overwhelmingly whether we respond or not, whether we are faithful, or not. God is.

God comes to our world whether or not we welcome God’s very self. God’s love is poured out on all people – whether or not we care. Our response is invited. God invites us into relationship with God’s self. To enter the life of God is to encounter the risk and cost of creation, the suffering of Christ on the cross, rejection, and denial.

When we encounter those things for ourselves, when we know pain or distress, rejection, denial of who we are, we do so as those who abide in God and in whom God abides, those in whom God has made God’s home. We are those whom God calls not because we are strong but because we are those who rely on the strength of God.

The life of discipleship is our whole-hearted response to God who gives has given us all, who gives and gives and gives – for all eternity. Our response is to say – here am I. Like Mary, we say yes to bearing God, yes to carrying God’s love in our hearts and our lives.

In the little Welsh chapel one voice might have wavered, but many voices together held and encouraged, supported and strengthened one another. What our life together is – it must be more than surface toleration or avoidance of that which we disagree about- we should be able to deal truthfully with difficult and painful things together as those who love God. Faith in the goodness of God cannot be switched on and off – whatever happens to us, God is love.

Each September at the beginning of each new Methodist year I re-read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together (an account of the life in the banned seminary he created as resistance to life under Hitler). In it he says - I know I am a forgiven child of God but I need to hear those words of forgiveness spoken to me by one of you my brothers and sisters.

If we are to live in and through the love of God, we need to do that in the company of our brothers and sisters, we need one another’s love, encouragement, challenge and trust in order to keep singing in the dark.

May we, together, abide in God, and in the love of God, in order that we become a community of love singing in the dark and in the light. May all we do, and all we can be as a community of disciples together in this place, be to your glory and praise. Amen.