

Easter 5

Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(or)

Risen Christ, your wounds declare your love for the world and the wonder of your risen life: give us compassion and courage to risk ourselves for those we serve, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Post Communion

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life: grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth, and to share his risen life; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.

Readings

Acts 8:26-end

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

John 15:1-8

¹⁵"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Rev.d David's Sermon 2 May 2021

During Holy Week I tried to talk about participating in the life of God. I wanted to convey the nature and depth and extraordinary beauty of the connection we are invited to in and through Jesus Christ.

Today's teaching from Jesus in the Gospel verses about the vine and the branches with its beautiful imagery reinforces this invitation to be partakers in the life of God... through life giving relationship in and with and through the risen Jesus.

Jesus is the vine. God the Father is the gardener (vinedresser). Believers in Jesus, those who are in relationship to him are the branches. There is so much here about the importance of the connection and attachment of the branches (us) to the vine (Jesus); it's essential, it's life giving.

In the Bible the vineyard is often used to describe God's people, Israel. So, with Jesus saying "I am the true vine (his last of 7 I am statements in John's Gospel), he is saying that he himself is the true Israel... the one in whom all God's people will be found. The one to whom all God's people will be connected and find life in all its fullness.

Let's just pick up a few things in this rich rich passage that is worth meditating on.

As we journey through Eastertide towards Pentecost and the wonderful gift of 'God in us' ... not just 'God with us.' I wonder how you respond to these wonderful words "Abide in me as I abide in you."

"Abide in me. Hold to me or continue in me, remain in me." The believer is intimately connected to Jesus like a branch on a vine. The image is a foretaste of St Paul's teaching on the Body of Christ, where all believers are members of the body, connected together in and through Christ.

Connection begins by believing and receiving the life of God. Accepting the words, the teaching, the promises of Jesus and crucially receiving the life of Jesus and allowing his teaching and his Spirit to infiltrate us, shape us and bring us life and growth.

ALL aspects of Christian life... praise and worship, Christian vocation and service, acts of love, mercy and kindness... stem from abiding, from being in union with God through Jesus Christ. God living in us and us living in God.

Christian belief and action, if it ever becomes disconnected from union, from relationship, from connection to the life and love and God... will start to wither and dry up. If your spiritual life has grown dry and feel as though you are withering inside, then return to the Lord and abide once again. Over the last year some folks have really struggled and are indeed struggling in their Christian journey particularly because of detachment from church. As individuals and a community we abide in Jesus once again.

Abiding in God's loving presence is the foundation on which every aspect of the Christian life flows and finds fulfilment.

St Augustine said,

"Love brings about the keeping of His commandments; but does the keeping of His commandments bring about love? Who can doubt that it is love which precedes? For he has no true ground for keeping the commandments who is destitute of love."

The nature of this union with God... is love. God has poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Romans 5:5)

Everything flows from the love of God, including our life together in this Parish. Our vision is to "live life together in the flow of God's love."

As the sap flows into the branches from the vine to give life, growth and fruitfulness so the loving holy presence of God, the Spirit of the risen Jesus flows into us to give life, growth and fruitfulness. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5) appear. Virtues thrive whilst vices are pruned and cleansed. Our lives give glory to God and bear witness to him. With his life in us we become Christlike.

⁴*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.* ⁵*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

As we think about abiding, there is something about “staying” with Jesus. We remain in close proximity to his presence. We dwell or indeed lodge with Jesus. We make and share the space with God... we allow him to make his home in us. (John 14:23)

We make space for God, intentionally recognising and remaining in his presence just like the branches stay attached to the vine and receive essential life giving nourishment.

Here I want to say something about prayer, and specifically the much-used term ‘contemplative prayer’ which fits in well with ‘abiding.’

The 14th Century mystic, Walter Hilton says,

“Contemplative prayer is a deep and simplified spiritual activity in which the mind and will are fused into one. They rest in a unified and simple concentration upon God, turned to him and intent upon him and absorbed in his own light, with a simple gaze which is perfect adoration because it silently tells God that we have left everything else and desire even to leave our own selves for his sake, and that he alone is important to us, he alone is our desire and consumed with love and enveloped in spiritual light, worthy to be called and to be the spouse of Christ.” (Walter Hilton... 14th Century mystic)

If this sounds too complicated and beyond us it might help to simply say that contemplative prayer is just a case of “being” in God’s presence and enjoying Him. We can all learn to do this and practice this as part of everyday life.

St Theresa of Avila (16th Century) said *“Contemplative prayer is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time to be alone with him who we know loves us.”*

William Ullathorne, a 19th Century Archbishop said,

“The acts of contemplation are: to seek after God, to find him, to feel his sacred touch in the soul, and to be united to him and enjoy him.”

How’s your friendship with God? Socially distanced? Seek God today... now... to find him, to feel his sacred touch in the soul, and to be united to him and enjoy him.”

This enjoyment of God and God enjoying us is rather important too and a fundamental part of abiding in God. The absence of joy within the Christian life can be crippling.

During a recent conversation with Bishop Rachel I was reminded of the importance of joy with life and specifically within the Christian life. The last year has had a lot of sadness, anxiety, rules, regulations and bureaucracy and a lack of play, recreation, laughter, happiness and joy. As we emerge from this time and we learn what it is to be God’s people once again, our individual and communal lives need to have fun, happiness, joy, gladness and play... and hopefully laughter in abundance.

Of course, life is not always easy. I certainly know that! This is where we persevere and endure and hold on trusting that the root of the vine is more than adequate to cope with wintery times of life or whatever storms come along. Jesus is the vine and his love is strong and deep and trustworthy. “Lord Jesus may I stay with you and you with me whatever life and death throw at me.”

I am always reminded of when Jesus said to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane “stay here and keep watch with me” (Matt 26:38). Jesus request to his friends. “Stay with me.”

It reminds us of that call to endure... to stay close to Jesus.

What I always think is lovely that we have Jesus saying “stay with me” to his disciples in Gethemane, but then after the resurrection the disciples having walked with the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road, say to Jesus “stay with us.”

And this can be a simple prayer of abiding we can say every single day, “stay with us Lord,” “stay with me.” “Be my company, be my guide, be my peace and comfort, my strength and stay.” “Stay with me” can be a prayer as you receive the Lord in Holy Communion, and as you walk out of this building and out into the world and into the coming week. “Stay with me Lord at home, at work, during these tasks, as I meet this or that person.” What have you got on tomorrow, or this week? As you abide in Jesus and stay close to Jesus you’ll be a fruitful disciple that gives glory to God.