

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE
2nd MAY 2021- FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

INTRODUCTION

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

(1 John 4.16)

I don't know about you, but whenever I try to repeat that back to myself without looking at the words, I always get myself in a twist and mix up who abides in who. It's a bit like one of those tongue twisters....

But the fact is - that even if you do get the words mixed up or the wrong way round – the message is clear and simple. God is love – and anyone who loves, knows God because he *is* love. Love isn't something that we choose for ourselves – it is only possible for us to love because God loves us.



Today we're thinking about the image of Jesus as the vine and if you've ever looked close up at a vine you'll notice it puts out these beautiful coils of tendrils that wrap themselves around the nearest branch. It's an image to hold onto, the tendril and the branch entwined. God and you, God and me bound together, entwined in love.

Pause for a moment to consider the vastness of God's vine and the breadth and depth of God's intimate and infinite love for you.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The light and peace of Jesus Christ be with you
and also with you.

The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.
Let us rejoice and sing God's praise for ever.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

We come to God as one from whom no secrets are hidden to ask for his forgiveness and peace.

God be gracious to us and bless us
and make your face to shine upon us.
Lord, have mercy,
Lord, have mercy.

May your ways be known on the earth,
your saving power among the nations.
Christ, have mercy,
Christ, have mercy.

You, Lord, have made known your salvation,
and reveal your justice in the sight of the nations.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love
bring us back to himself,
forgive us our sins,
and assure us of his eternal love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pause for Reflection

Richer than gold is the love of my Lord

Love is his mark, love is His sign,
Bread for our strength, wine for our joy,
This is my body, this is my blood
Love, only love is His sign.

*Richer than gold is the love of my Lord.
Better than splendour and wealth.*

Love is His news, Love is His name,
We are His own, chosen and called,
Family, brethren, cousins and kin.

Love, only love is His name.

Love is His name, love is His law,
Hear His command, all who are His,
Love one another, I have loved you
Love, only love, is His law.

NEW TESTAMENT READING

Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

Then 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.) So 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.



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Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now 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.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to

He spoke, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As 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?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When 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. But 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.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING

John 15.1-8 (The Message)

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John,
Glory to you, O Lord.

"I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn't bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.

"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you



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can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION (by Andy Todd)



Viv and I used to visit some friends who live in a leafy suburb of London. I don't remember much about their house, but what I do remember very clearly was their beautiful and spacious garden. In particular, they had a wonderful patio area over and around which grew a magnificent vine. There were branches everywhere: we would sit there with leaves, tendrils, and, in the right season, little bunches of grapes hanging all around us. I vividly recall the interplay of light and welcome shade, the sense of profusion, vitality, life – even joy!

That's the first image which comes to mind every time I read Jesus' words, "I am the vine: you are the branches." The vine is the source of life, of energy, of goodness and fruitfulness which flows through every branch and tendril, keeping them green, bringing fruit in season. Cut off from the vine, the branches quickly wither and fade. In just the same way, Jesus is saying, the Church derives its true life from keeping in close contact with him. The Church's life is an extension of Jesus' life. If that close contact is lost, if the branches are no longer drawing their life-energy direct from him, then what is left quickly becomes a dried husk, unable to flourish or bear fruit.

It's a powerful image; but what does it mean? How does the Church keep that kind of close, life-giving contact with the vine, with Christ?

There is a collective side to it – something that you and I do and are together. As we gather together (online or in person) to listen to God's word; as we bring the world and the people on our hearts before God in prayer; as we celebrate the presence of Christ among us in the Eucharist; as we seek to incarnate God's love in our care for one another and those outside the Church family; as we above all seek to place Christ at the centre of our life together; then we are plugged into the life of the Vine.

But equally there is an individual side to it – something we do as individuals. Each of us needs in our daily lives to keep Christ at the centre – by regular prayer, by allowing God to speak to us through the Bible, by patterning our lives on Jesus.

Our life as a community, and our lives as individuals: both of these need to be rooted and grounded in Christ.

And notice this is not just for Easter or just for Christmas or just for Sundays. “Remain in me,” says Jesus – or as some versions put it, “Abide in me.” By contrast with so much of what contemporary society values - the quick fix, the instant gratification - the Christian life is about commitment, about keeping at it, day after day, come rain, come shine. Like any strong relationship, this relationship, this being rooted in Christ is for the long-haul.

I’m going to pause there for a moment, and ask you to reflect: are you aware of trying to abide in Christ? Are you aware of trying to keep him central in your life, the choices you make, how you spend your time and money? And are you conscious of Christ being the living heart at the centre of our life together as a Church family?

[Pause...]

I started with the image of a garden in a London suburb, and a vine there. There was just one thing wrong with that vine, and I only realised it quite recently when on a family holiday we visited a vineyard in France. The grapes on the garden vine were tiny and a bit anaemic-looking! By comparison, the clusters of grapes on the vines in the vineyard would be huge and richly-coloured. The reason? Very simply, whereas the branches of the garden vine had been allowed to run riot, the vines in the vineyard had been quite harshly pruned. The garden vine was literally collapsing under its own weight, a lot of the goodness being diverted into supporting random, wayward tendrils; in the tended vines, which were actually surprisingly small, all the goodness was going into making fruit: and the difference was spectacular. (And very delicious!)



Jesus is, as ever, quite straight with his followers. The Church does not exist for the sole gratification of its members; it exists to be a channel of God’s blessing into a needy and broken world. In other words, it is to be fruitful. If the branches have got so carried away that they have lost sight of their purpose of

fruit-bearing, then there is only one thing to be done. The vine-dresser will need to take their secateurs and get down to some serious pruning.

The past year has been a painful time, and it is absolutely right and proper that you and I grieve over some of what has been lost. We have had to be without much in the life of our Church. But is it not possible that, in God's providence, there might also have been a pruning, a stripping away of some things which, though good and worthy in their own right, might need to make way for something better and more fruitful?

One of our tasks as a Church community in the months ahead will be to begin to discern how we are to flourish as a fruitful vine, bringing God's blessing to one another and to our communities. To what things might we need to say "goodbye"? What discoveries made during the pandemic may we need to develop? What new things may we need to explore?

It will be a time of learning to keep Christ at the centre of our lives as individuals and together. We will need patience as we learn to abide faithfully, looking to God and not simply to our own ideas and resourcefulness.



The promise of Christ is that, if we remain rooted in him, submitting to the vinedresser's tending, we will be channels of healing, challenge and joy in a world which has never been in greater need of God's new life.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Let us declare our faith
in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he was buried;
he was raised to life on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures;
afterwards he appeared to his followers,
and to all the apostles:
this we have received
and this we believe.
Amen**

PRAYERS

Let us pray to the Lord God Almighty,
In whom we live and move and have our being.

Father, we want to produce good fruit in abundance;
nurture us as branches of the true vine,
train and prune us where necessary,
and may our spiritual harvest make rich wine,
wine of your kingdom.

Silence

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Father, clearly we see around our world,
the tragic and expensive consequences
of branches cut off from the true vine.
We pray for a seeking after your truth
and a desire to act rightly and justly
in all areas of human society.

Silence

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Father, we pray for those to whom we are linked
by family, friendships or work;
especially we pray for those
separated from their loved ones or from their homes.

Silence

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Father, we long for healing and wholeness
in all who suffer
and in all dysfunctional communities;
guide us to understand
how we might be part of the healing.
We pray for all are sick or in any kind of need,

praying especially for: Rose Adams, Paul, David New, Anna Clements and Adrina and Alan Price.

And in a moment of silence, we pray for those on our own hearts who are in need of prayer.

Silence

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Father we know that death cannot separate us from your love; in that knowledge we commend to your keeping those who have died and all who miss them.

We remember those who recently died: Rosemary Rowberry and David Thompson.

And we remember with love and gratitude: Felix Alexander, Joan Kendall, Jim Thorp, Jo Wasley, Alice Laver, Joy Smith and Joan Sennett. Grant us with them, a share in your eternal kingdom.

Silence

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done.

Father, we thank you that we can live in the joyful freedom of your love, as we dedicate ourselves to serving others.

Merciful Father,

**accept these prayer
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin
against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory, for ever
and ever.
Amen.**

Pause for reflection

I am the vine, you are the branches

I am the vine, you are the branches:
No one can live apart from me.
Cut off from me you can do nothing:
Yet joined with me, all things are yours.

You are the fruit borne by my Father,
Who tends and cares for every limb.
Be not afraid: he will not harm you.
Your fear he'll prune, and set you free.

Remain in me: keep my commandments.
My love for you led me to die.
Hold fast to me: I'll never leave you,
In life, in death, I'll love you still.

SENDING

From where we are
to where you need us,
Jesus, now lead on.

From the security of what we know
to the adventure of what you will reveal,
Jesus, now lead on.

To refashion this world
until it resembles the shape of your kingdom,
Jesus, now lead on.

Because good things have been prepared
for those who love God,
Jesus now lead on.

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

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