

Easter 6, Year B, 5 May 2024

John 15. (1-8), 9-17, **Acts 10.44-end**, 1 John 5.1-6, Psalm 98

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 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.

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

1 John 5.1-6: Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

May the words of my mouth and the song of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. (According to Psalm 19.14)

A few weeks ago we heard Jesus in whom God dwells, Christians believe, say of himself, 'I am the good shepherd.' (John 10. 11 & 14) Today Jesus says of himself, 'I am the true vine, and my father is the vine-grower.' Actually we heard Jesus says 'I [Jesus] am the true vine, and my father is the vine-grower' last Sunday already, it being the appointed gospel. I have included in this week's gospel reading there being little time to explore both the reading from Acts, Philip and the Candace's treasurer, and the appointed gospel with the enduring theme of abiding.

As the majority of you know by now a group from Christ Church followed Paul on his last recorded biblical journey from Puetoli, a Roman harbour city on the west coast of Italy today to the eternal city, Rome. It was a well themed pilgrimage, because we not only had the last chapter from the Book of the Acts documenting Paul's journey to direct us, but we could also read the letter to the Romans together and reflect on it. I mention this because Romans after a short introduction continues with chapters on how we are justified followed by chapters on what it means to be in Christ. The language of being in Christ in Roman is not all that different from the language of abiding in Christ in John. There is a tradition that John, the author of the Gospel bearing his name lived in Ephesus, where Paul will spend 2 1/2 years. There may well have been mutual exchanges on the new creation in Christ made possible through his death and resurrection with the inauguration of a new and far superior covenant. (See Hebrew 8.6)

By adding last Sunday's gospel to this week's we also see how the imagery of fruit is taken forward, when Jesus informs the disciples that he has appointed them for going out. There is a purpose to this going out. This sending. They are to go out and bear much fruit, fruit that will last, by enabling people from every tribe, nation and language to also abide in Christ. They are to do this bearing of much fruit, fruit that will last on the basis of having entered into a new relationship, a more intimate relationship with Jesus no longer as servants, but as friends having first been invited by Jesus to abide in him, so that in and through him they may also abide in the Father. The connection to John's opening chapter is clear. There we read, 'No one has ever seen God. It is God's only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' (John 1.18)

In the other gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke the emphasis is on the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like this... In John's gospel it is about relationship, mutuality, interdependence and responsibility summed up in the reality of friendship.

Relationship: abide in me as I abide in you; you are my friends

Mutuality: love one another, as I have loved

Responsibility: go and bear fruit; keep my commandments

Interdependence: apart from me you can do nothing

Some of the above four categories Relationship, Mutuality, Responsibility, Interdependence we will wholeheartedly welcome and others we will be more ambivalent about, especially I venture to suggest when it comes to interdependence, when the trajectory we are presently set on is always one to absolute freedom free of dependence. The autonomy of the individual shall rule. This autonomy, if not balanced by the recognition of interdependence leads to anarchy. But others will also jar and possibly even more namely being appointed to go out and bear much fruit, fruit that will last, as well as keeping Jesus' commandments, which are as he says the Father's commandments.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

Jesus goes on to say and it is a favourite passage, I, [Jesus], say 'these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' This is a word that we will want to take to heart, 'that your joy may be complete'. Jesus comes to do many things, as his name already indicates meaning as it does to rescue, to deliver. Jesus comes as he says to save us that our joy may be complete. We are not only saved from something, but we are also saved to something. We are saved from sin and death, but we are also saved as well articulated in John's gospel to a life of joy, of flourishing, of abundance, of friendship, of abiding in. We are saved for the fullness of life. To but it bluntly apart from Jesus our joy remains incomplete, whatever people may say. I would want to witness to the truth of what Jesus says here as we all should as Christians. My life is richer for knowing God in Jesus. This 'knowing God in Jesus is succinctly put by one commentator. 'Love is not an abstract concept in this gospel [of John] but is deeply grounded in God's decision to dwell as Jesus in the world.

Given today's gospel joy remains incomplete without the friendship of God into which we are invited. Pruning will be required. It is an ongoing process this pruning that in the end we may become even more vibrant in faith as we abide in Christ. It is a friendship that makes us vulnerable. We are a welcoming community, ours is a trusting welcome, assuming mutuality, interdependence, adherence to the commandments of God. A readiness say to lay down destructive behaviour. The misuse of this initial trust has led to Safeguarding requirements in churches being for ever being ratcheted up. The Quakers taking this gospel seriously called themselves, The Society of the Friends of God. Although the Society is small in numbers today they have made disproportionate contributions to science, industry, and especially to the Christian effort for social reform. It's not about numbers... It is not about quantity, but about quality...

We are set apart. And the gift of this life, and the gift of the new life in Jesus comes through abiding in Him, who abides in the Father, who is close to the Father's heart. It is John's contention that no one has seen the Father except Jesus and that through him and abiding in him we too come to know the Father, who we have not seen. It is a startlingly this we come to know the Father. Let's pinch ourselves. Is this overreach?! Consider Jesus' reply to Philip whose question launches the lengthy Farewell Discourse in John. By the time Jesus' finishes the discourse he must have been a little exhausted. Just thinking about this passage after many years for gives me pause? Philip asks 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.', Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?'

The similarities between the imagery of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and Jesus, and the friend that Jesus is to the disciples in every age, who abide in him and keep his commandments means that Jesus lays down his life for us, each of us, for he knows us by name. And as he says, 'No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it [my life] down, and I have power to take it up again.' (John 18.10)

I know from experience that one of the greatest compliments I can give is to acknowledge another person's capacity for friendship mostly indirectly, when in conversation others concerning a person's qualities/virtues. For me personally the capacity for friendship is high one. Friendship is based on having a capacity to befriend, to nurture, to learn from one another and to go the extra mile. Many of you will have

heard someone or other say when calamity struck in one of its many guises, having survived the wreckage of the landscape, it was during that time I learnt who my friends really were. Capacity for friendship is Verpflichtung/obligation. Obligation means literally to be bound to... When we probe this concept of friendship we will see what a fragile thing it can sometimes be, but abiding in Christ...

I was appalled when FaceBook choose to take the word friend hostage! Even now I shudder... How many friends do you have on FaceBook? FaceBook I am sorry to say cheapened the word friendship. Acquaintances may have been preferable to friends, but would have also missed the mark... It can however not be denied that by following a person on say Instagram, Facebook, X, TikTok and most if not all podcasts we enter into a relationship with people through the different media available to us, but we are not friends in the deeper sense of the word as outlined above. I have benefited very much from social media, podcasts, YouTube videos, but I am also deeply aware of the dangers that are lurking and already amongst us, if we are not vigilant, threatening as they do our moral bearings. Keep the Father's commandments is a clarion call as is Jesus' reminder that 'his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.' (1 John 5.4)