

Morning Worship for Sunday 2 May, 2021

from the United Reformed Church at Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

Opening Words

Hymn: Come and find the quiet centre

Come and find the quiet centre
in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter,
find the space where we are freed:
clear the chaos and the clutter,
clear our eyes, that we can see
all the things that really matter,
be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a friend who claims us,
cools the heat and slows the pace,
God it is who speaks and names us,
knows our being, touches base,
making space within our thinking,
lifting shades to show the sun,
raising courage when we're shrinking,
finding scope for faith begun.

In the Spirit let us travel,
open to each other's pain,
let our loves and fears unravel,
celebrate the space we gain:
there's a place for deepest dreaming,
there's a time for hearts to care,
in the Spirit's lively scheming
there is always room to spare!

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Prayer of Approach

Lord Jesus,
We will hear today that you are the true vine
And how you encourage your disciples to stay
connected with you.
In these times when we cannot meet together as
church, as we would like,
it is hard to stay connected.
We pray that through this time of worship we may
connect with you again, and through you
to connect too with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As the hymn says, we want to find the quiet centre,
the place where you are,
the source of all the life-giving energy that flows
through us.
May we, during this time of worship,

receive all the nourishment we need
to refresh and renew our bodies and minds.

Empowered by your Spirit,
and strengthened by your word,
may we go again about our daily business,
knowing that you remain with us
and we remain connected to each other.
Sharing life and remaining in love.
Amen

Reading John 15: 1-8

"I am the true vine"

Prayer of confession

Gracious God
we come to you aware of our failings and conscious
that we have tried to live in our own strength,
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have resisted the challenge of change and not
trusted your truth,
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have rooted ourselves in our wills and not in your
word,
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have looked for quick fixes and not kingdom-
shaped growth,
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,
your Son, our Saviour.
AMEN

Words of assurance

Lord we thank you that
when our faith becomes straggly, you prune it with
your wisdom;
when it becomes malnourished, you nurture it with
your grace;
when it becomes brittle, you strengthen it with your
truth;
when it becomes barren, you restore it with your life-
giving energy, forgiveness and love.
Amen

Hymn: You are the vine

You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You
You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You

Then we'll grow in Your love
And we'll go in Your Name
That the world will surely know
That You have power to heal

And to save

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Sermon

Last week we were looking at the letter of John who instructed his disciples to love one another, because it was loving one another that would give their identity and let them know they were God's people and belonged to God. It is in our love for each other in which we know we are with God, not through our religious talk and spiritual practice.

As John says.. It is in loving,,that we know that we belong to the truth.

And it is with these letters that John wrote to his church, that it is thought that the fourth gospel (John's gospel) was re-written and amended to reinforce and make clear John's intention and meaning. We will see a lot of the intention of John's letters, is reinforced and picked up in what we read of in John's gospel today. When John focuses on Jesus being the vine, he calls his followers to remain rooted to that vine, and not to become one of those branches that is fruitless, and cut away and burnt.

There is a church tradition, which says, that when John was evidently an old man in Ephesus, he had to be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples. At these meetings, he was accustomed to say no more than, "Little children, love one another!" After a time, the disciples wearied at always hearing the same words, asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"It is the Lord's command," was his reply. "And if this alone be done, it is enough!"

There are some of you joining in worship with us today, who might worry that you don't know the bible enough, or pray enough, or are spiritual enough. That it is by these things that you might know you are a good Christian or belong to God. John is fighting against that kind of thinking in these letters.

What John says to his followers is "if all we do is love one another....if this alone be done...in God's eyes it is enough."

Ok - so let me illustrate this with an intellectual argument. It is an appropriate illustration to use in the week leading up to the elections that are to take place on Thursday

Here's a cow. (*show picture of cow*) We have seen our politicians argue and debate over policies, and manifestos using a lot of words to try and convince us, the voters, that we should stick with their party. That they are the ones we should belong to. Well once when Abraham Lincoln was struggling to convince a stubborn elector to vote one way or another he used this argument:

Lincoln said: "Well, lets see, how many legs has a cow?"

"Four of course," came the reply disgustedly
Lincoln said "Now suppose you call the tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have"

And the answer?

"Why five of course!" came the confident reply
"Now that's where you're wrong" said Lincoln.
"Calling a cow's tail a leg, doesn't make it a leg."

I don't quite know what point Lincoln was trying to make, but calling yourself something doesn't make you something. A lot of the criticism I hear about the current political debates is how the party leaders are dressing things up to appeal to the electorate - where there has been less emphasis on policies, and more on popularity in order to win people's votes. And perhaps what Lincoln illustrates is that when it comes down to it, no matter what we decide to call ourselves next Thursday whether it be Conservative, or Labour, or Green, or SNP - it doesn't make us those things. We are not for example a Liberal Democrat, just because we vote that way - it is by our philosophy, our ethics, the way we live our lives that will show who we are.

And as I have reflected on the gospel passage this week, where Jesus uses the vine as illustration of who is connected to God and who is not, there is perhaps one verse that stands out more than most.

John 15 v 8 says:

"This is to my Fathers glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples".

I have been challenged to consider how our actions as Christians reflect our Christian faith. What Lincoln does is remind us very cleverly that calling ourselves Christians does not make us Christian. John reminds us that it is by the fruit that we bear, by our actions and what we do, that we shall be known to be disciples of Christ.

The passage from John's gospel of Jesus and the vine used to read, "those who abide in me, will bear much fruit". Now we don't use the word abide. Instead the word remain is used, If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

We don't use the word abide very much, its old fashioned. We don't say "stop and abide for a while" we say "stop and rest for a while". My sat nav doesn't say to me "abide in the left hand lane", it says "remain in the left hand lane."

And that's a shame, because abide has a meaning that gets lost when we change it in this passage.

The definition of abide is "to tolerate, endure, act in accordance with, remain faithful to, remain, continue, dwell,"

When the passage says 'remain in me" we tend to think this means , keep on going to church, or keep reading the bible, or pray everyday, -- and yes its all those things. But abide means to tolerate, to endure, to act in accordance with, to remain faithful to.

When we abide in Christ, it is about integrity, it is about our actions being faithful to what we believe. It is about living our lives, in accordance with Christ. It's about having the life giving sap of the vine, flowing through every vein, in our body. It's about being so ripe with Christ's love, that we cannot help but to bear good fruit.

"This is to my Fathers glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples"

Nowadays we are blessed with technology that connects to the internet and to the telephone networks in ways we can't see and struggle to understand. But I notice that all around the manse where we live there are phone points where in the past phones have been plugged in at various points around the house.

I had a go at plugging our house phone into these various sockets only to discover that many were no longer working. I could take my phone and plug it into the socket but get nothing. Making a phone call to our friends and family, or receiving a phone call was not possible. Because at some time those phone points had become disconnected from the main network.

We have to stay connected.

If we want to receive his word in our lives then we need to stay connected.

If we want God to speak to us then we to stay connected to the network.

If the phone is not connected, it doesn't matter how hard you try, the message wont get through.

If the branch of the vine is not connected, the sap cannot reach it to give it life.

It is about recognising our connectedness to Christ but also to each other. To recognise that the life giving energy we need comes from our rootedness in Christ, and that the only way we can really receive this is being connected to each other. Not just on Sunday, but in all areas of our lives.

If we want to be fruitful. If we want our church, our community to be fruitful, we have to abide with each other, and remain connected.

If I took a branch and cut it off the vine, it would start to die. And then if I waved that branch past the vine, it wouldn't pulse with life, it wouldn't flow again with energy. For that to happen, I need to graft it on. I need to ensure that it lives within the vine constantly. The same goes for us as Christians. We cannot just pass through Church on a Sunday, and have a chance encounter with God, and think that that's enough. We need to be grafted on, we need to live with God constantly.

Now I'm not saying that is easy. It is hard to live as community. John knows that, that's why he had to write the letters to his churches, to encourage and instruct how to do it. As a church, we still need to struggle and wrestle with this idea of how we live in community with each other. We need to recognise that it is no good just brushing past each other on a Sunday. We need to find ways of connecting with each other, through the whole of life. That's what we need to aspire to, That's what Jesus imagines when uses the parable of the vine, a living and breathing community, connected and dependent on each other, rooted in Christ, yet spreading out and being fruitful in the world.

How do we do this? John tells his followers, and tells us, and keeps telling us.

"Little children, love one another!..... And if this alone be done, it is enough!"

Prayers

Jesus Christ, the true vine,
in our need
we come to You,
in weakness,
needing Your strength
for we too easily become dry and lifeless
without Your life-giving spirit.

Jesus Christ, the true vine,
teach us to remain in You
and so to find Your life flowing in us
giving strength and vigour to our discipleship.

And as we come closer to You
our lives are drawn closer to others.

Our minds turn to images of violence we have seen
on the news in places of fear and terror,
to where people are at loggerheads,
over race, religion, land, power.

Our thoughts turn to Christians
living with persecution
who face danger, simply for being linked to You.
Father, prune back all that stands in the way of peace.

Our thoughts turn to people
in leadership and power
– who have decisions to make over the economy
and people whose jobs and livelihood will be affected.
We pray for our nation, and its leaders.
May changes and choices be shaped by the values of
the kingdom.

On our hearts
are people in need in our church and community.
Wherever hearts are breaking ...
bodies are failing ...
minds are confused ...
families are ruptured ...

Lord, come with Your help and healing.
Here, too, as Your church gathered today,
we give thanks for the saints of the past
and the fruit they have borne in our community and
beyond.
Like them, help us to remain in You
that we may be fruitful
and bring glory to Your name.
Through Jesus Christ, the true vine.
Amen

(Written by Rev Fraser Penny, Minister of Dunkeld
Parish Church
From Church of Scotland “Weekly worship”)

Hymn: Be thou my vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
thou my best thought in the day and the night,
waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my dignity, thou my delight;
thou my soul's shelter, and thou my strong tower:

raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
thou mine inheritance now and always;
thou and thou only, the first in my heart;
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,
grant me its joys after victory is won;
heart of my own heart, what ever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish, ca. 8th century; trans. Mary Byrne (1880-1931) versified,
Eleanor Hull (1860-1935)