



La Côte Anglican Church

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Sermon from Louise Burrows
28 April 2024 – Morning Prayer in Divonne

John 15:1-8

As some of you know, I am a keen gardener, and so I couldn't resist speaking on the gospel passage today, rather than the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Although I don't have a grape vine, I do have apple and pear trees that I prune heavily every summer, for shape and to encourage fruiting. Unfortunately, I'm not very good at pruning, and the crop so far has been pitiful. Fortunately, the gardener in our gospel passage today is God himself, and, thankfully, he does know what he is doing.

Jesus uses the image of a vine, in which we are the branches. Even a heavily pruned vine grows many branches, and they are all connected. The same sap that runs up from the roots of the vine, runs through all the branches. Similarly, we are members of a community of faith, connected to one another and sustained by Christ; if we cut ourselves off from Christ and from each other, we will wither.

The key word in this passage is 'abide', it is used eight times in just eight verses. Jesus states that he abides in us. Obviously as a human being Jesus was limited, but the resurrected Christ, the one through whom and for whom all things were created, now abides in us through the Holy Spirit. He invites us to abide in him in return. God's love is freely and constantly given, but we get to choose whether or not to live in that love, and this is a decision, rather than a feeling.

So, what does it mean to abide? To start of with, there is enormous value in setting aside regular times to read the Bible and pray, and there are lots of resources available to help us with that. Beyond that, in the everyday, we can practise the presence of God by consciously directing our thoughts towards God at various moments, while doing the dishes, on the commute to work, when waking in the morning or just before we go to sleep at night.

Part of abiding is about the things that we choose to focus on. There is so much wrong with the world, and it is so easy to get brought down by that; do we make the most of the good and lovely things we see, or do we rush on by? A few weeks ago, I saw a goldfinch in real life for the first time ever. It was just an arm's length away from me and I paused to enjoy its beauty, it was a precious moment in which I abided in the glory of God.

You may already know the Native American story in which a grandfather tells his grandson that two wolves live in every human heart. The wolves fight each other until the day we

die. One is evil- anger, envy, pride, arrogance, vengeance, guilt, and resentment. The other is good- joy, peace, patience, love, kindness, and faith. The little boy asks his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?” The grandfather replies, “The one you feed.”

Another way to think of it is as treading a new path – imagine needing to cross virgin forest, it’s tough going and hard work as you cut through branches that hinder your way. The next time that you take that route it will be much easier, until a proper path is formed by your constant travel across it. As we practice new behaviours, new ways of thinking, we create new neural pathways in our brains. These pathways get stronger with repetition until the behaviour is the new normal. As we practise patterns of thinking and being, of abiding in Christ, it becomes easier as time goes on.

The branches show the nature of the vine by the fruit they bear. As we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us, we will bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience and so on that helps others see something of God. A friend of mine told me a story about her elderly neighbour. The two of them were struggling to hear each other speak because the street was being dug up by workmen using pneumatic drills. My friend started complaining about the noise, but the elderly neighbour expressed great compassion for the poor workmen who had to put up with that noise all day, every day. The elderly neighbour had spent a lifetime abiding in Christ and her life bore forth the fruit of compassion.

But the image of the vine is also a tough one, there’s the not insignificant matter of pruning. Jesus says that “every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit”, that sounds painful, think secateurs and exposed wounds.

Jesus says that his father removes every branch in him that bears no fruit. You could say that he was pruned by becoming a human being and going through the trials and tribulations of human existence: his hidden childhood experiences, the temptation in the wilderness, rejection in Galilee, and the events of his passion. His response to these events shaped him.

This pruning happens to us in a similar way, in situations where there is some resistance, where we are stretched and uncomfortable. Where we’re out of control and need to trust God. This pruning can break down our sense of self-sufficiency and bring us to a place of vulnerability, where we acknowledge our need to abide in God.

I don’t believe that God inflicts painful things on us, but God can use anything that happens to bring about growth and fruitfulness. Our job is to trust that nothing is wasted and to welcome God to work in all the circumstances of our lives.

It may be a painful process, the part of us that is pruned away dies, there may be genuine losses to mourn, but we have the hope of future fruitfulness. It is also a journey that we take together as a community, sometimes we may feel like vigorously growing branches able to contribute to the rest of the vine, and sometimes we may feel like we are being pruned and

need the rest of the branches to lend us their strength. There are times and seasons in our spiritual lives, but we are nurtured in a living relationship, full of unexpected twists and turns.

Jesus doesn't mince his words about fruitless branches, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" – how are we to deal with this?

It's a strong statement about the consequences of the choices we make from a place of separation; he isn't making a threat, but rather speaking from his observations of life. Whenever we do anything unloving, even if it's just a negative, angry, or judgmental thought, at that moment, we're not abiding in Christ. This state is useless, like a branch cut off from the vine that's not bearing fruit that might as well be thrown it into the fire.

So, abiding in Christ is essential, but how do we know if we are doing it? One way to think about it might be to reflect on those moments when we clearly aren't abiding, because they can act as signposts. For me, one sign is a sense of being overwhelmed and feeling overly responsible, which can make me feel resentful. I wonder what the signs are that you aren't abiding in God's love?... It is worth noticing these moments and acknowledging them for what they are, not judging ourselves for them, but with compassion on ourselves, redirecting our attention to the true vine.

There is a useful Ignatian practice that might help us keep an eye on these ebbs and flows of our inner lives, called the prayer of Examen. The idea is that we review the events of each day and thank God for the blessings, the things we are grateful for – whether something as small as a beautiful shaft of sunlight, or as wonderful as the love we receive from another person, anything that connects us back to the true vine. Then we look back to find moments in the day when things didn't go so well, either when we were hurt or when we caused hurt, those moments when we felt separated from the vine – and we ask for healing and forgiveness. Finally, we ask for the grace we need to abide in God's love so we can live the next day well. There is a version of this prayer in the pewsheet, and I offer it to you to try out and see whether you find it helpful.

Right now, things seem very dark on the world stage, there is a general anxiety about the future and many people and nations are turning in on themselves in fear. In the midst of this, we are called to seek out the truth and the light, to bear fruit that is helpful and healing. Not denying the negative or trivialising it, but finding ways to abide in Christ within it, to entrust ourselves, those we love and the whole world to the love of God. Amen.