

Abide...

Have ever pruned a grapevine, it looks like a job that requires great expertise. One day the vineyard is a straggly mass of branches and the next something between a stick and a trunk stands almost naked tied into a wire frame. Now I know it is not quite as simple as that but without serious and accurate pruning the harvest will dwindle in yield and quality.

Our Gospel is more than the good gardeners guide to pruning. Jesus tells us that he is “the true vine” and in doing so, he joins the biblical tradition and language of the vine that we find throughout the Old Testament and other parts of the Gospels. Psalm 80: *‘You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.’* Isaiah (5.7) *‘For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting...’* Jeremiah (2.21) *‘Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?’* Matthew (21.23) *‘There was a landowner who planted a vineyard... Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. The people of God are understood to be the vine (or the vineyard), and God is the “vine-dresser”.*

Seeing Gods People in this way asks the question, ‘how does God would respond to human faithlessness and sin.’ In the OT God had brought the vine out of Egypt, but they continued to turn their face from him. The Vine and Vineyard metaphor brings uncertainty about the relationship, will God uproot the people, a kind of slash and burn policy, or perhaps the vine-dresser might seek a new variety to grow and tend. In the Gospels through Christ, this uncertainty comes to an end. As Pope Benedict XVI put it, *“the vine is no longer merely a creature that God looks upon with love that he can still uproot and reject. In the Son (Jesus) he has forever identified himself... with the vine.”*

God now, through Jesus, has identified himself with the vine, and in doing so makes the relationship personal, a relationship that is expressed in the understanding of what it is to ‘Abide’.

Abide is key to how we understand the ministry and mission of Jesus and his relationship to us as church, ‘God abides with and in us’. Christ calls us to abide in him, and that he will abide in us. He calls us to make our home, our ‘abode’ with him, as he has made his home his abode in us. In the Chapter preceding this one, Jesus tells us that there are many rooms in his father's house. There are many places of gathering and meeting there. And central to the notion of an abode is the concept of abiding. It is not just the dwelling, it is not just the structure, it is the action of living in. But it is more than that. We can also define the word abide as... to ‘wait patiently with’. Our reading from 1 John is explicate in the nature of that abiding, we find it rooted, grounded, earthed, grafted in the nature of love. ‘God sent his Son that we might live through him,’ through this interaction of humanity in divinity that is understood as love. To ‘wait patiently with’ is a bit like that sitting on the sofa watching TV or listening to music with someone you love, no words spoken, just being together, or sat by the bedside of someone you love just holding their hand. It is at these points, these moments that we come close, I believe to understanding what Jesus is saying when he says abide in me and I in you.

These are crystalline or special moments when we understand that God through Christ invites us to abide with him. But we can find it also in the ordinary and the everyday because that is how and where Jesus ministered, in the ordinary.

You have heard me use the phrase ‘he pitched his tent’, which is my translation of *‘dwelt among us’* in John’s prologue, not just because it speaks of the transient nature of Christ’s time with us, but it also speaks of the ordinary. Jesus came into the ordinariness of human life, into the day-to-day challenges. No palace or privilege. He came to us, he sat with us, ate with us, walked with us, and lived with and among us. It is one of the reasons John’s Gospel ends with Jesus doing ordinary things. Breaking bread, eating breakfast on the seashore. He was with us at the beginning and he is with us at the end. He will not leave us. Through Christ, God abides in the ordinary and invites us the ordinary and extraordinary to abide in and with him.

This is not just about remaining in a cosy insulated relationship with God, we are called as church to abide with the world also- especially to be with those who have no one to be with them. The lonely, the unloved, the forgotten - God wills us to abide with them, as well as with each other. God wills us to ‘Reach out and share his love’. That is our challenge as we move forward.

Philip