

Reflection - The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
28-04-2024  
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Acts 8: 26-40      Phillip and the Ethiopian

Psalms 22: 26-32    Everyone will turn to the Lord

1 John 4: 7-21      God is Love – God's love and our love

John 15: 1-8        Jesus teaches about the vine and the branches

Introduction – Abide in Me

Today I'd like to focus on the words from verse 4 of our Gospel reading.

“Jesus says - “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

I'd like to look at what it might mean for us if we abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in us.

Abiding in Jesus – How does this compare with Worldly Leadership

Let's begin by looking at how “Abiding in Jesus” might be different to following leaders in a worldly sense. What are some leaders you can think of. Maybe say, your boss at work, or the captain of your local football team, or maybe even the Prime Minister. All of these might be people, whose leadership we follow. Maybe willingly, maybe not so willingly, but follow none the less.

Have you ever had a leader like this ask you to abide in them? Have you ever had a leader like this tell you that they would like to abide in you? I don't know about you, but I certainly haven't. So, in a worldly sense there's something quite different about being a follower of Jesus.

It's one thing to say we believe there was a person called Jesus, and that he lived 2000 years ago. Even those who might be taken up by the fiction of the “da vinci code” might believe that, but it's a very different thing altogether to say that we are one of his followers. To be a follower of Jesus is to abide in him as he abides in us. This mutual abiding points to a relationship that is very different to the ones we have with other people.

Being a follower of Jesus, means that we accept what he has done for us in his life, death and resurrection, and also that we invite him into our lives. I think the analogy Jesus gives of the vine and the branches works very well to show this. The branches are very much connected to the vine, and the branches rely on the vine.

As followers of Jesus, we need to remain connected and rely totally on him. If we abide in Jesus, we abide in his love. The reading from John's 1<sup>st</sup> letter today makes that very clear.

### Not Abiding

Let's now look at what it might mean not to abide in him. And I'd like to continue with Jesus' analogy of the vine. God wants us to abide in him. That's why he sent Jesus. But in this world, we have free will. We can make choices. I believe this is what Jesus is trying to show us with the analogy of the vine. He quite clearly tells us what is going to happen to branches that don't bear fruit or fall away. These branches are thrown into the fire and burned.

Does this mean that Jesus doesn't love those branches? Of course it doesn't. He loves us all equally, but his love calls for a response. In John chapter 14 Jesus says, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

The message of the Gospel is Good News, but it has to be accepted. As branches we need to be aware of the consequences of cutting ourselves off from the vine.

### Abiding - Pruning

Let's now look at the branches that remain in the vine. Those that bear fruit. You would think they would be alright, but we hear that they are also cut back. On the face of it, it might appear that as the poor branches we can't win.

If we don't bear fruit, we get cut off.

If we bear fruit, we get pruned anyway.

But being pruned is very different from being cut off from the vine. Jesus says he prunes the branches that are producing fruit, so they will be able to produce more.

The analogy of pruning in our lives may take on many forms. We need to be mindful that God is Love, and doesn't make bad things happen to us, but we know that through our actions or the actions of others, bad things can and do happen. God can use these events to strengthen us.

I recall when I first began in ministry as an assistant curate, and there were a number of instances where I was being challenged. Once was when a lady with severe mental health issues was constantly calling me. I had to pastorally assist this lady, who was not from the parish, but who found herself there seeking help. It took time and effort, and was a situation that I wasn't at all used to. Despite the difficulty for me it was a joy to assist someone, and I know now that next time a situation like that arises, with the help of God I will

be much better equipped to help someone. It might not seem exactly like pruning, but sometimes God works with us through the challenges.

Another example of being pruned, is Philip in the story we heard from Acts today. In the section preceding the reading we heard today, it told of the success Philip was having preaching in Samaria. And yet the angel of the Lord told him to go and wait by the road that leads to the desert. I think that would have to play on your mind. You've got a successful ministry, and you're told to go and wait on the road that leads out to the desert. I'm assuming it's a road not too many people travel on, and yet Philip is obedient. As a result of him abiding in Jesus and Jesus in him, he goes to this desert road, and the fruit here is the Gospel being spread to another country - Ethiopia.

Another example of pruning is parents correcting their children. When children are disobedient, the loving thing for a parent to do is to correct them. This might mean they are punished. Does this mean the mother or father doesn't love them? Of course it doesn't. But unless children are corrected, they will not learn the difference between right and wrong. Parents correct their children because they love them.

So, similarly God loves us. There is no question about that, but sometimes when things happen in our lives, we might not be able to feel this. God may be allowing us to be pruned and we may not realize it. Sometimes things happen in our lives that we don't understand. It might not be till later when we look back on it that we realize that through such difficulties, that our characters have been enhanced and our faith has been strengthened.

If we abide in Jesus, like the branch does in the vine, then no matter what happens to us we have the assurance of his love. God loves us, he may allow us to be pruned at times to help us grow, but as long as we remain in him, he will remain in us.

### Abiding – Bearing Fruit

Let's now look at the branches that bear fruit.

Often, we see bearing fruit in a purely mathematical way – fruit bearing equates to winning souls for Christ. And in one sense this is correct, but in Paul's letter to the Galatians and Peter's second letter, we hear of the fruits of the spirit. We hear of the fruits of the spirit as love, joy and peace, of patience, kindness and goodness, of faithfulness, gentleness and self control. If we abide in Jesus then these fruits of the spirit will abide in us. When these fruits abide in us, God's love will be shown to those around us.

When we are filled with the fruit of the Spirit, God uses us to bear fruit, and to advance his Kingdom.

But we may not always see the results that come from having this fruit in our lives. Philip probably never knew the full results of his witness to the Ethiopian official. A mother from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Susanna Wesley could probably never have imagined in her wildest dreams the profound Christian influence her sons John and Charles would have on the world. We might not always see the result of bearing such fruit in our lives, but we can know that it is only if we ourselves bear the fruit of the spirit that we will have the ability to effectively pass it on to others.

### Conclusion

Today we've looked at how we abide in Jesus and how he abides in us. We've used the story Jesus told of the vine and the branches to do this. We've heard how unproductive branches will be cut off, and even how branches that are productive will be pruned so they can bear more fruit. As we live lives abiding in Jesus, we may not, in this world at least, see the full extent as to how God uses us to bring about his plans. But we know we are called to abide in Jesus, and that he will abide in us. I pray that as we continue to abide in him, he will use us to bear his fruit. Fruit of love, joy and peace, of patience, kindness and goodness, of faithfulness, gentleness and self control.  
Amen.