

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 2 May 2021 - Fifth Sunday of Easter

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Acts 8.26-end; Psalm 22.25-end; I John 4.7-end; **John 15.1-8**

Homily

Today's homily has been written by The Rev'd David Newton, Team Vicar in the Lordsbridge Team

NB. This homily begins with a story, and you may want to clarify who 'I' is before beginning

I cannot claim to have had many spiritual experiences in my time. And the things that have happened that I might talk of in those terms have been pretty mundane. One was in a Maundy Thursday service. The altars were stripped, Peter's denial was re-told, and the lights went out; we were left in darkness and metaphorically taken to Gethsemane. I was bowled over, absorbed by the drama as I found myself *with* Christ in quite a new way.

Another "spiritual experience", more pertinent for today, involves our extraordinary Gospel reading. I was driving along the A41 near Watford. I was coming up to a set of traffic lights on what is well known in that area as the 'dome' roundabout. As I sat at the red light I was 'hit' by a paraphrase of one verse in this passage. The words resounded around my head, 'Abide in me and you will bear much fruit'.

That was the "spiritual experience". A verse popping into my head at a traffic light. That was it. But this happened 15 years ago and for some reason it has stayed with me. It clearly went deep. It 'hit' a nerve, as they say.

At the time I was desperate to do good, live well, please the Lord. I was trying so hard to make a difference, I was involved in all sorts of projects, and trying so hard to make it count. I wasn't exactly trying to earn my salvation, but there were certainly some unhealthy habits and rhythms in my life. So, sitting in my car at those red traffic lights I was feeling a bit overwhelmed. I was feeling like I was a bit of a failure. I had reached the limit of 'trying'. And in that place, I heard a voice, 'abide in me and you will bear much fruit'.

You may know of 'Boxer' in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. One of his favourite phrases is 'I will work harder'. In a stage version there is a constant refrain from the animals, 'we will work, work, harder we will work.' Unfortunately, Boxer's work didn't exactly lead to justice or peace. It propped up the tyrant pig Napoleon, and it led to his own demise.

The Gospel passage is stark. 'Apart from me you can do nothing' it says, but also 'Abide in me and you will bear much fruit'. What is so striking is the assurance here; if you do abide then fruit *will* follow. There is no question, no hedging, no possibility of fruit, but the simple assurance that abiding in Christ will lead to fruit.

Many of us want to do good, make a difference, build a better world – even if that just means serving our neighbour. And such desires are well founded.

But the Gospel asks us to let go of all such desires! Our first calling is not to make a difference; it is simply to abide. The rest will follow. But if we get our desire to Christ and our desire to make a difference the wrong way round then who knows what the fruit will be.

This is all pretty paradoxical. Aim to make a difference and you might well fail. Aim to simply abide in the love of Jesus and you're guaranteed to make a difference.

What is going on here? We could put it as follows.

"Trying hard" to do good carries two problems. The first problem is that in being fixated on doing good we can easily become full of anxiety, and keen to prove ourselves, and so ultimately self-absorbed. It all becomes about us and appeasing our conscience.

The second problem is that in seeking to 'make a difference' we can very easily put ideas and causes above people. Everyone becomes a means to an end. We subtly and unwittingly start thinking about people in terms of how useful they are to this particular good cause or project. Everything – and everyone - becomes measured in terms of utility, of usefulness!

Internally we can become anxious and self-absorbed; externally we treat people as objects to be used. No wonder Jesus warns us that this does not lead to good fruit.

So, we have to start somewhere else. Not with the desire to make a difference, but simply a desire to be with Jesus. Or in the terms of our passage, to abide.

Abide in his love, we hear. Abide, and you will bear fruit. Abide, and the rest will follow.

Such abiding has no set formula. There are as many ways to do abide as there are people on this earth, and each of us must find our own way to learn to abide according to the structures and responsibilities of our lives. Not all of us can live semi-monastic lives that devote two hours a day to contemplation! Yet, the call to follow Jesus is a call first and foremost to abide. There is no get around.

Clearly, Philip was one who abided in Christ. We read that an angel said to go, and so off Philip went. We read that the Spirit said go, and so he ran. Here was one who heard the Spirit's voice. And perhaps this story gives us a clue as to what might be at the heart of 'abiding', even as it can take infinite number of shapes. Perhaps it has something to do with being able to hear and be receptive to the voice of Jesus. My sheep know my voice and they listen to me, Jesus says elsewhere.

This is not about hearing a voice or having a 'word of knowledge' and so on (although as the story of Philip suggest we shouldn't discount the possibility). Rather, this is about being open to that still small voice which sings a song of love over us. It is about being rooted firmly in a non-anxious, unconditional and non-competitive life-giving Presence. It means all our actions and words and thoughts flow from that Word spoken to us, that ushers us into being, that holds us in love, and that keeps us into eternity.

May we know that voice, may we cling to it through the turbulent seas. May we seek to abide, and in abiding trust that we will bear fruit. Amen.

Suggested intercessions

For those who feel unloved this day, may they hear your voice of love... [We pray for...]

For those who feel anxious or afraid this day, may they hear your voice of peace... [We pray for...]

For those who lead or govern, may they hear your voice of wisdom... [We pray for...]

For those who are downtrodden by others, may they hear your voice of judgement and mercy... [We pray for...]

For all of us who are you church, may we respond to your voice with willing hearts. **Amen.**

Suggested hymns/songs

- You are the vine and we are the branches
- Love Divine, all loves excelling
- I danced in the morning when the world was begun
- The strife is o'er, the battle done
- Love's redeeming work is done
- A new commandment I give unto you
- Jesus I have promised
- Alleluia, alleluia. Hearts to heaven and voices raise
- Like the murmur of the dove's song
- Spirit of God, unseen as the wind

All-age activities

Bring a plant – preferably one in flower. Talk about what it needs to grow, and the need for roots. Cut a stem and / or flower off and ask what will happen to it now it is no longer part of the plant. Connect this to the bible passage.

Have card cut outs of a trunk, branches, and fruit. Talk about Jesus as the trunk, us as the branches, and the fruit that comes from being connected to the trunk. Write or draw on the fruit what they might represent.

Take some time to 'abide' in God's Love. Children can be amazing at engaging in silence if we let them. There are different ways you could do this. A prayer labyrinth on the floor marked out with masking tape could work. Alternatively individual mats to sit on can work well, and explain that we're going to be silent for a whole minute (or two even).