

Rooted and Rambling

Easter V 2021

1 John 4:7-21

Acts 8:25-end

John 15:1-8

The terraces of Cinque Terre coast, north west Italy, are impossibly steep. Cut by Roman slaves, the whole coast is now a World Heritage Site. Walking among them, vines ramble all over the place, more like ivy overrunning a cliff than the trimmed privet like vines of Bordeaux. Now that expendable slave labour is not approved of, tending and harvesting is a precarious business. Today's vintners travel up and down with great buckets on a terrifyingly rickety monorail structure that makes any death plunge at Alton Towers seem tame. Their vines may look riotous, but the delicate white wines they produce are clear and delicate, like a refreshing sea breeze. They even have a slight hint of salt. You can't approve of the slavery in their history. The place is compromised, like all human habitation. The vines, though, rooted in perilous, compromised places, ramble around to give us fruit for the blessing of community.

Jesus calls himself a vine, and his followers, including us, to his branches, and talks of "abiding," living, resting, drawing strength and security in our unity with him. He is our source of life, energy and purpose. You can see why many believe the Johannine letters to be from the same pen, or at least school of prayer. More literally it sings of abiding in God's love and God's love abiding in us, and his love casts out all fear. It may sound rather black and white, the idea of there being no fear in love. It is important to remember that John's insight begins with the Word, the Love of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. That in mind, what is our fear? Fear of oblivion? Fear of otherness? Fear of pain? Fear of loneliness and rejection? Fear of unjust suffering? Take your pick. We live with those. We still live with those. But the word became flesh to prove he knows our fear, our pain, our isolation, our grief, our rejection. So this promise that perfect love casts out fear and that whoever fears has not reached perfection in love is not to intimidate but to encourage; it to liberate, not to inhibit. Our faith journey is towards love's perfection, naming but marginalising our fears, pushing them into perspective because God knows them, not because he rejects us because of them.

Sunday by Sunday this season we watch the Church in Acts extend her reach, gain her confidence and discover her gifts. Our readings jump around a bit, but Chapters 8 and 9 make an astonishing sequence leaving us breathless with fear and joy. With fear and joy the women had run from the empty tomb. (Matthew 28) Now, the men having caught their wonder, in Chapter 7 we saw Stephen, murdered with Saul's approval from the side lines. While devout friends buried Stephen with loud lamentation, this event energises Saul to persecute the Church. Philip meanwhile preached in Samaria, while Peter and John ministered in Jerusalem. Somewhat surprised to hear of the positive response to Philip's adventurous ministry, they went

to pray for the new foreign followers of Jesus. Perhaps remembering Jesus' reciprocal exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well, who did the ground work for them (John 4)- and I love to think they might have met her again - there they preach to crowds, they pray for little groups and they minister to individuals with careful attention. Then Philip finds himself alongside a high ranking official from North East Africa and reflects with him, who is eager to be baptised. This is followed in the next chapter by the conversion of Saul and the church's brave welcome to their chief persecutor.

This Ethiopian official is surely one of the loveliest people we meet in the New Testament. In charge of the entire country's finances, we could call him First Lord of the Treasury. From Philip's point of view, it's striking that he senses a call to go into the wilderness. What on earth is the point of that? And yet there with filmic vividness he encounters sumptuous riches: a rich man with a priceless religious scroll in a chariot and political power. Yet also riches of devotion. It's not surprising that for many years, gay clergy have generally been of a higher calibre than straight clergy. It's clumsy to talk of high standards when comparing priests, but it's generally so. When you think what a gay Christian has had to live with to continue worshipping in the Church at all, then as they hear the Spirit's call to ministry, what they have to navigate once they start exploring it, then all through training, what they have to field, then looking for a parish, wondering every time whether they will be safe. Then, as their ministry evolves, there are all the passive aggressive statements of tolerance from the House of Bishops, let alone the fears around if they fall in love. Navigating all that stuff - other people's stuff - still they serve. The wistful courage I have so often loved and admired in gay colleagues becomes an exquisite charism for ministry. Of course they are by default usually better than those like me who have met no resistance.

That Ethiopian official has made a perilous journey to Jerusalem to worship. What that means we don't know, other than he has the most beautiful humble curiosity. We do know that, getting there, he can't even go in the temple. The scriptures are sadly fierce about excluding eunuchs. After all that journey, and knowing his rank, we should feel the grace of his purchasing an astonishingly expensive, rare scroll and reading, still fascinated, in spite of the rejection. "How will I understand unless someone explains it to me" he says, extending hospitality to the dusty stranger, Philip. This First Lord of the Treasury knows his need of a teacher and of God. His eagerness to be baptised is palpable. his capacity for joy, even as Philip is taken from him, is wonderful. High office has not knocked the moral stuffing out of him. Contrast our First Lord of the Treasury, so much more like the man the Apostle's previously encountered, Simon, a pathological attention seeker who tried to buy favours, whom the had to give a fearsome telling off. (8:9-2).

We pause in awe of the beautiful Ethiopian man of great power and then can consider how attentive the Church had to be in order to meet him and discover his gifts. The apostles are learning on their feet, opportunistic in a good way, generous and clearly expectant of enormous diversity. In this heady sequence, they address the authorities, a national leader, a religious fanatic, a disabled person, a man

troubled in mental health, and groups of ordinary citizens from Jerusalem to Samaria with the same accent, the same kind of attention, the same expectation, without prejudice, so that people of every hue can enjoy knowing Jesus of Nazareth and through him, find their place at ease in the company of God. It's legitimate to ask how these roving apostles were funded. We get glimpses in the likes of cloth merchant Lydia and Dorcas whose work fed the poor. What allowed Philip to wander in the Spirit, and Peter and John to dash off to Samaria. We note their generosity. They don't just take the good news they have discovered to their own families and their own villages. They anticipate diversity. In order to fulfil their impulsive ministry, they depend on the small Christian communities that are sprouting up, rooted in their own neighbourhoods. Peter, Paul, Philip, get to roam around, but there are people to stay with as they do. Theirs is the story of Acts, too.

The Gospels and Acts show us that the women and men of Jesus' fellowship each find their own pace of learning and shape their own ministry, some travelling around, some staying put. As we emerge from lockdown with fear and joy, each at our own pace, the Church is emerging humbled by the sharing of the imposed fast of world wide pandemic, but her confidence curiously renewed. We are set up, in the Church of England, to stay put in every neighbourhood, and institutionally placed to address national leaders as well as to attend to individual needs in hidden corners of forgotten neighbourhoods. Although tempted to be preoccupied with straining resources, we knew before we had to reshape our ministry somewhat. But now we face a remarkable opportunity to refresh our service and preaching. It is a moment to open our hearts afresh to the Spirit's prompting both to stay and to move, to be generously opportunistic in serving all kinds of people with the same accent of love. There is plenty to speak boldly about to the powers that be, but with renewed expectation that people of power have vulnerabilities and *could* be faithful. We are good at staying put, but maybe can also find ourselves renewed in more agile, fluid ministries that can react impulsively to need. Rooted in every community, yet rambling like those Italian vines, we, too, are growing in historically compromised land, but the Gospel is a counsel of hope, not perfection. Making something beautiful out of whatever we are given is our calling.

It's important to note that no one has to be all those things for the Church to bear fruit. No one church community has to be all things. From infuriating Simon to Gracious Ethiopian, we each offer our own flawed personality type and from rooted Dorcas and Lydia to impulsive Philip, each of us

There will be grief and loss along the way. As with those burying Stephen and every grieving family knows, we still need to offer a language for lament as well as Easter joy. But the Church's expectation is of heaven's peace. Therefore in anticipation, her expectation is of joy in diversity. For fear of isolation, oblivion, pain, otherness, rejection is outshone by joy. Forgive me ranging hurriedly over Acts. You don't have to remember all the people I've mentioned outside of today's passage. If you want to catch the early church's vivacity, settle down with Acts, a glass of wine, perhaps by an open door where you can feel the spring breeze, and read with an open heart. As you are caught up in its energy, notice that not a single weapon is carried

by one of Jesus' followers. Notice that no-one of any class or ethnicity is excluded. Notice that every impulse, every movement, every word is for the healing of others. Could we live so in 2021? Could we bear much fruit? Incidentally, that fruit is probably not church growth. The best fruit of the vine is plucked and taken away to be a blessing somewhere else, a little sweet grace at the table of a stranger we may never meet.