

ABIDING – REV'D CATHERINE EATON – SUNDAY 10TH MAY 2009

Readings: Acts 8.26-40, Ps 22.26-32, 1 John 4.7-21, John 15.1-8

As many of you know, I've just had a few weeks leave. It's been wonderful to rest and let go of the stresses and, in a sense, come home to myself. I've learnt again the art of abiding.

Abiding. What a wonderful word.... Abiding - it has that sense of being at home, of indwelling, of being connected, of resting, of waiting. It's a word which speaks of tranquility and trust.

Today's readings are full of 'abidings' - God abiding in us and us abiding in God, and the Spirit given as a sign of this mutual indwelling. And likewise, when we abide in love, it's a sign of our relationship with God and God's love abiding in us.

In the gospel, Jesus speaks of the need for us to abide in him, as he abides in us, to remain connected to him, as the branch connects to the vine. The branch is dependent on the vine, resting in this relationship where the life of the vine flows directly into the branch. Our relationship to Christ is to be of such dependence that his life also flows into us. As we let his words dwell within us and abide in us, that mutual relationship will become evident in the fruit of our lives and the answers to our prayers.

This I'm sure is what happened for Philip in the Acts reading. His openness to the Spirit's prompting led him to the Ethiopian struggling to understand the words of Isaiah. Here we see this mutual relationship between Christ the vine and Philip the branch, of God abiding in Philip and Philip abiding in God. Perhaps many of you have had similar experiences, perhaps not so dramatic, where you've sensed yourself strangely led into some timely encounter with another person.

Abiding – it's a wonderful word. It's no wonder we don't use it much today, as it's a word which speaks of rest and trust and waiting. We're not a very abiding kind of society – we're not a restful society and we certainly don't like to wait and well, trust went out the door some years ago.

We're disconnected from ourselves, from one another, from nature and from God. We don't seem to dwell within our lives, but rather, we live more on the surface of life, rarely resting in a still or silent moment, and often not even at home in our own bodies. We are not people who dwell deeply in the place where we are. We are mostly on the move.

We've replaced the word 'abide' now with words like 'live'. In the wedding service we don't say 'those who abide in love abide in God'. Now we say 'those who live in love live in God'. The word 'live' suits us better today, as it implies doing something, getting on with it and being in control. 'Abide' sounds almost passive, because it implies some deeper connection, putting down roots, resting where we are, trusting, and, in a sense, giving ourselves to where we are. Jesus says it's up to us to choose to remain connected to him. He already abides in us, but we must give ourselves to this mutual relationship.

'Abiding' It's a perfect word to consider on Mothers' Day, as it's through our mothers that we first learn to abide. In the womb that's what we do – we abide there as life grows in us. There's nothing to do but wait, rest and be nourished. Gradually we can make some movement, but for the most part, all we can do is abide, dwell there in peace and safety and trust. So unless the pregnancy is particularly difficult, most of us begin to learn about abiding in the womb.

And when we're born, if we're lucky enough to be born into the safety of a loving family, we learn more about abiding, as we rest in the arms of parents, nourished at the breast, and surrounded by the familiarity of home.

As we grow and venture out into the world, if we've been lucky, we carry that early experience of trust and love within, and we begin to find our connectedness within ourselves. But this is often threatened by the external demands upon us to build a life and be a particular kind of person, to achieve this or do that, to raise our own families, and so on. And so our attentions naturally focus outwards more and more.

But suddenly, in our latter years, as physical abilities wane, we find we need to learn the art of abiding again, to rest in our bodies with their growing limitations, to find contentment in the confines of our own spaces, and to trust more to the spirit within.

But abiding is not just for the beginning and end of our lives. We learn about abiding in trust and love from our early days so that we can carry that capacity within. For me, this is the great launching place for encounter with God. In the places of our abiding within, we find ourselves connected, not just to some memory of childhood, but to the deeper source of life which is God, the source of love, and love's abiding home.

This is adult abiding, grown up work, for abiding is not about doing nothing, but about learning to rest on the ground within us, listening to the spirit within us, waiting on God when we would rather rush ahead, living our lives from the inside out. It's about remaining connected within to that deep source of love, which is God abiding in us. It's about making our choices and carrying out our work while remaining connected to that inner ground where we find our truth and where we hear the inner promptings of the Spirit as Philip did.

It's the place where faith and life intersect, but also sadly the place where the voice of the Spirit and the voice of the world are in conflict.

Remaining connected to the vine is a challenge for us. Living as Christ calls us to live, deeply connected to him and to his words, is to put ourselves potentially in conflict with the demands and expectations around and within us. We are so enculturated to certain ways of being and seeing the world, that often we don't realise we've disconnected from the vine, from ourselves, from God.

How often have we been in a situation like Philip, where we sense an inner prompting to do something which perhaps seems surprising, and we've pooh-poohed the idea as our own silliness and ignored it? The story of Philip sounds so straight forward. The angel said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south.' ...So he got up and went. For all we know, Philip thought at first he was imagining things. Then perhaps he thought, no this is a stupid idea, I'm supposed to be doing such and such. Or perhaps he was just so preoccupied that at first he didn't even hear the angel's voice.

Then the Spirit told him to go to the chariot – for all we know, Philip stood watching for some time, thinking what a stupid idea, I can't just go up and intrude on this person. Perhaps he too had to struggle with his private fears and concerns about social etiquette.

Abiding is an adult art, because it's only as we learn to trust in that ground of love within us, where God speaks to us, where we can rest in him in faith, where we live as branches of the true vine, that we can find the way to life in all its fullness. Abiding is about trusting ourselves to the goodness of God. This week was the feast-day for Julian of Norwich – she knew about this when she wrote – '*all will be well, all will be well, all manner of thing shall be well.*' Abiding is an adult thing to do.

Jesus calls us to love, to abide in God's love within us. Here we can be rid of our fears. Perfect love casts out fear we are told. Too often we think it is the quality of our love that matters. Rather it is God's perfect love already within us that gives us that resting place safe from all fear.

Part of my challenge, as I return to work this week, is to maintain that inner connection, that sense of abiding, and to discern how we can be a more 'abiding' parish, trusting ourselves to the faithfulness of God, while allowing God to prune us so that Christ's life can flow through us. It's a challenge not to let the external demands and expectations overtake us.

Many of you have heard me say similar things before about trying not to get caught up in the busyness, but without much luck. So I return with a few ideas and a number of options for me and for the parish which I will present to Vestry next week. Part of your job, as you abide in God this week, is to pray for our discernment. I will say more after that.

A quick exercise – today we heard another of the great 'I am' statements from Jesus. 'I am the true vine', he says. Elsewhere he refers to himself as the good shepherd, light, bread, gate and so on. We all have many ways of describing ourselves. So I ask you to think of the first noun that comes into your head when you say about yourself 'I am

Perhaps you might have said 'I am a mother, a retired person, an artist, a human being, a wife, a golfer, an old person, a teacher, a parent, a shade of my former self,

During the week take half an hour some time to sit quietly and watch out the window or go and sit by the beach, go some place where you can simply abide, in yourself and in God. At the end of the half hour say it again with the first thing that comes to mind – "I am a....."

Sometimes when we focus on the externals all the time, our sense of ourselves, the language we use about ourselves can be quite different from the sense of ourselves which rises up from within us. It may be hard for some of you to find that half hour, may be scary to do, but give it a try and see what happens.

The Lord be with you in your abiding.

Catherine Eaton