

Easter 6 - Year B

I was asked a serious question last Sunday after the 9.45 by a very nice person who is hardly ever able to attend but enjoys it when the opportunity arises.

‘How can you belong?’ said this person. ‘How can you belong to the Church when you know that so many people are discriminated against or whose life-style doesn’t fit and are told that they are in error’s way?’ Okay – I admit the phrase ‘error’s way’ was my interpretation of what was said to me. It transpired that this good person had never felt able to commit to **any** branch of Christianity because of what they felt was a bigotry against differing life-styles and who people felt themselves to be. ‘You preached today what I feel, and yet you belong to a body which do not express this overwhelming connectedness to God, and the grace of God for all people of which you spoke of.’

Gulp! So, remembering that I preached about our connectedness to the Living Vine - the idea that we are spiritually fed as branches with the sap of Love - I was forced to ask myself where the Church fits into all of this, with its multitude of denominations and practices. How do these relate (if at all) to each other? So, you see, I had my theological homework ready for me in this past week. Although I had several quiet days at the Vicarage because of a bug, I didn’t stop pondering what was said to me. So, let’s start our consideration.

Jesus’ words from the Gospel reading present an urgency of the indwelling of love, both from the Father, the Son, and all those who profess themselves as Christians:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

What amazing words.

Over the past couple of Sundays, we have pondered Jesus as the good shepherd and the true vine. This week we are almost overwhelmed by the Johannine call to love. I am inclined to say that we are being led on a journey in all these readings– an exploration of Jesus’ call to his followers about what it means to be a disciple and ultimately what it means to be ‘Church.’ We are the pilgrim people of God - the sign of God’s in-dwelling - called to reveal this extraordinary love to the world through our own humanity. And this exploration of who Jesus is and how we relate to him is as much a Resurrection encounter on every other day of the year as well as at Easter. We are Easter people.

Yet to encounter the Risen Lord during these great Fifty days of Easter, does helps us in our call further into discipleship. Today it is no coincidence that we are called to love and follow him because he has revealed himself as faithful and loving to each one of us through death and resurrection. This is because Jesus identifies with each one of us through his own

humanity. No matter what we must deal with, Jesus knows the same joy, the same pain that touches each of our lives, because he too has walked the path of humanity as one of us.

If we allow it, in Jesus, our **desires** and **love** are re-directed, re-aimed at God and we find our heart's anchor. Love is not passive, it is active, and it is obedient. God's love for each of us is never failing, revealed as it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus. How does this identification of God with humanity reveal itself?

For me, the gift of Jesus to the world **is** God's comfort to each one of us here today, and indeed to all the people. Jesus came to reveal that God is present with us no matter what. That comfort transcends the human-made divisions of race, religion and culture. It is unsolicited mercy and grace - unconditional love on the part of God **and** Jesus, who gives himself entirely for each one of us.

The Passion and Death of Jesus unites him with humanity - that appalling death on the cross unites him with the suffering people of Syria and indeed the whole of suffering humanity. We are called to pray that transformation will be brought to all conflicts around the globe, in and through us and people like us, through the indwelling of God's Love. God loves us so much that through his Son that he provides the ultimate comfort for all people. This comfort for all people is brought about **in** and **through** Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through you and me. We are called to be signs of love.

So, what of the Church? Well, **WE** are the Church. Yes, we have structures (some bewildering or even deeply flawed), yet ultimately the Church **is US**. How we communicate with the world is not dependent on the structures of the Church. We are called to signs of God's Love with each other and the wider world. Yes, you can be a Christian without 'belonging' to a denomination, but you lose one of the most important things - your connectedness to other Christians – your important place as part of the Body of Christ. This is how you fulfil your full potential. Sometimes it can be a painful connectedness, but we should never underestimate its importance. We have structures through necessity, and also tradition. Although flawed, they are signs of our commonality with fellow Christians who have gone before us in faith and those will follow us in faith.

The late theologian Marcus Borg posed the question, 'What's it all about? What's the Christian life all about?' - he answered: 'It's about loving God and loving what God loves. It's about becoming passionate about God and participating in God's passion for a different kind of world, here and now.'

Jesus sums it up even more directly than Borg:

I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Alleluia. The Lord is Risen- He is risen indeed. Alleluia!



Andrea Pozzo (from 1685), Sant 'Ignazio Church, Rome

Acts 10: 44-end

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

1 John 5: 1-6,

Faith Conquers the World

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ^[a] has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. ⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

John 15: 9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants^[a] any longer, because the servant^[b] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.