

## Easter V Year B 2018

You know what it is like when something gets on your mind and you can't let it go. We have this tendency to home in on things and, a bit like a dog chewing a bone, not to let it go. I find this so most particularly with music – not so bad. So, since I looked at our readings for this Sunday, I have had a song running around my mind – one of those rather smoochy songs from The American Song Book – those wonderful songs and lyrics from yesteryear. I'll tell you what the song is later, but let's just think about the passages of Scripture for today.

During this Easter Season Christians are asked to explore through the readings what it means to be people of the Resurrection Life of Jesus – as sisters and brothers in Christ.

First, in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we have Philip, one of the Seven Deacons of the early Church, zipping around all over the place, filled with the Holy Spirit. The colourful nature of his meeting with the Ethiopian Eunuch – the high official from the Court of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia – might make you wonder why all is described in such detail. Certainly, we have the feel that the Ethiopian is a real seeker after faith. He has been worshipping in Jerusalem, so we must presume that he was hungering and thirsting after spirituality within his life. The very fact that he is reading from the Prophet Isaiah draws us to conclude that he has found something in Judaism which is leading him to find God.

However, the *greater* importance of this story is perhaps not recognised unless we know that as a eunuch, he could never fully be a member of the worshipping community within Judaism according to the Mosaic Laws in the Book of Deuteronomy<sup>1</sup>. I am sure that this would not been a problem now, but it would certainly have been so then. Thus, the Gospel message means that no matter who you are, or what your status, you are equal to everyone else within God's Love. There is no bar, no discrimination and no rule. All you need is a sincere desire to seek a relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ. You enter the waters of baptism and rise as the beloved of God. No wonder the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing!

We moved away last week from exploring the Gospel accounts of Easter to one of the intense theological reflections which appear in John's Gospel. Last week we considered the middle of these seven sayings: 'I am the good shepherd,' and as I said then, that there is a reason why that reflection is not just the middle of the seven, but also at the heart of the Gospel. The heart of the Gospel message is about self-giving love – 'I lay down my life for the sheep' – that phrase repeated four times. This self-giving is not the same as self-negation. Far from it. Self-giving means finding who you are really called to be by loving and serving others before yourself, and our exemplar is seen in Jesus as he gives himself for **us** on the cross, finding Resurrection life not just for himself, but for all who follow him. In other words, our lives are to be lived in the light of his Resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 23: 1.

Today's Gospel reading was the last of these seven reflections, and, again, I don't think that this is by random on John's part.

Vine imagery features heavily in the Old Testament: Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea all describe the Children of Israel as the vine. In some cases, trampled down or consumed – references to catastrophe or faithlessness leading to disaster. Here, though, Jesus gives us something radically different. **HE** is the vine, and we are intimately connected to him and thus to God, just as branches are to the vine. The life-giving, self-giving vine gives us the sap of the Holy Spirit to enable us to bear the rich fruit of the Kingdom in drawing others to know the truth and beauty of the fulness of life found within our Faith.

The imagery Jesus uses is so vivid that we can imagine that he has been in vineyards watching and even helping to prune and prepare the vines to bear a full crop. This teaches us that we are to know the intimacy of relationship with God, but also our interaction with one another as part of the Body of Christ. We are one with him as the branches are to the stem, and one with each other through the same sap of love which we know flows from our connection to Jesus Christ.

Before I get bogged down in imagery, it's as well to remember the significance of all this to the world here and now, because this Good News of the Gospel message is needed as much as ever, if not more so. Into the chasm of aspects of modern life - the rise in mental illness, social breakdown, self-obsession, greed and oppression - we have the answer: **God is Love and those who live in love live in God, and God in them**<sup>2</sup>. This 'indwelling' is something to be grown through seeking to enlarge our knowledge of faith through reading the Bible and knowing that when we approach the Table of the Lord, the bread of Life and rich wine of the Kingdom feeds us through the self-offering love of Jesus.

You have probably forgotten the mention of a song at the start of my sermon, so much have I said, but the sense of the closeness of God within our lives had these words by Lorenz Hart running through my mind:

You're nearer, than my head is to my pillow  
Nearer, than the wind is to the willow  
Dearer, than the rain is to the earth below  
Precious as the sun to the things that grow  
You're nearer, than the ivy to the wall is  
Nearer, than the winter to the fall is  
Leave me, but when you're away, you'll know  
You're nearer, for I love you so.

God's song to us is that his love **never** fails us, even if sometimes we feel far away. Through his Son - the true and living vine – we are drawn into the intimacy of the love at the heart of all creation.

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<sup>2</sup> | John 4: 16.



Mosaics of eastern apse (1130s) Basilica of San Clemente al Laterano, Rome

### Acts 8: 26-end

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south<sup>[a]</sup> to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' <sup>31</sup> He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' <sup>[b]</sup> <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip<sup>[c]</sup> baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

### **1 John 4: 7-21**

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

<sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. <sup>15</sup> God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup> Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

### **John 15: 1-8**

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. <sup>2</sup> He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become <sup>[c]</sup> my disciples.