

Sun 28 April 2024: Fifth Sunday of Easter

A short sermon today, because I do feel the need to say something about myself and my own life since May 2017 when I stepped down from this lectern and handed over to Fr Richard.

In looking at today's readings I was struck by Jesus' words of departure to his disciples: 'abide in me as I abide in you,' and I just want to reflect on these words for a few moments. I'd always thought of this as a reciprocal thing – you and me, me and you – as it indeed is. Except that there's a grammatical difference in the two verbs. Someone like me who, among other things, has taught English at high school level for many years, should be attentive to grammatical differences, but I only noticed this one the other day: Jesus words 'As I abide in you,' are in the indicative mood: they indicate something that is already the case, already a matter of fact. Jesus is saying to them (and us) I am already in you – even though you may not realise it; even though *we* may not have noticed it. 'Abide in me,' on the other hand, are in the imperative; these words are a command or a request to the disciples; something they (and we) are called upon to do, to carry out, to implement, moving forward into the future. This is something new – we already know, or should know, that we abide in Christ; that we are close to his heart, that we are held within the compass of Christ's love for the world and all its people, and indeed all its creatures. We know this, or should do – even though we forget. We should know this if we reflect on our own

baptism – it is not into the Anglican church, or even the church universal; ultimately, our baptism is a baptism into Christ. And I would add to that, our baptism is an outward and visible sign (that’s the definition of a sacrament) of something that is inward and spiritual, and already the case. God’s grace, God’s generosity towards us already is there before our baptism – that’s one of the reasons I happen to believe infant baptism is important: we are never outside of God’s love for us, no one is, and baptism is simply the outward and visible sign of this inward reality. The world as a whole is ‘in God’ through being ‘in Christ.’

But ‘abide in me’ is a calling – it’s no less of a calling than that call of Jesus to those fishermen at the start of his public ministry – a call to do something. And it’s not a hard thing to do: it’s simply a matter of ‘abiding’, resting, living, inhabiting – consciously inhabiting – the one in whom we already abide as a matter of fact. This is a calling, the explicit calling, we receive in our baptism: try to be aware of whom we really are, and in whom we really live and move and have our being.

This is what the Ethiopian eunuch was asking about: he was already a godfearer, a fellow-traveller in other words: he’d been to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival, but he didn’t understand the real life implications of his own actions until they were explained to him. This is also what the epistle today is about when it says ‘God is love.’ Note that it doesn’t just say God loves, or God is a loving God, but *God is love*; God is as it were constituted by love. This is why we speak of God as Trinity: God is

constituted by God's own intra-communal relationships of love. If this were not the case, God would be something other than the God we as Christians know.

This does not mean that those who fail to see or understand this are outside of God's love – how could they be, when God's love extends to encompass the whole cosmos and all that's in it? It's just that this love of God's - begins within Godself. It is not something extrinsic to God. I'll be saying more about this when we come to Trinity Sunday.

For now, all I want to say is: let's each of us try abiding – consciously abiding - in Christ. This is easy, as I've said, and yet consciously doing it is not quite so easy. So let's start small: for today, just think consciously when we come to the words of institution in our eucharist, the words 'this is my body/ this is my blood.' Try this can be a though experiment, if you like, for each of us. Think consciously of Christ coming to abide with us now as bread and wine, and to dwell within us and become a part of us – physically and bodily, so that we also consciously abide in him. Our consciousness of this is our abiding in him, so that we ourselves become emissaries of his presence – so that we carry Christ's presence to all each of us will meet this day and this week.

