

5th Sunday of Easter. 10th May, 2009
Acts 8:26-40, Ps 133, 1 Jn 4:7-21, Jn 15: 1-8

The True Vine

What a charming story from Acts that is about the Ethiopian eunuch, hurtling through the desert, lounging in the back of his chariot as he reads from the Book of Isaiah. Then Philip appears out of nowhere to explain to this high court official what he is reading, with the result that the Ethiopian is converted and baptised. Then Philip disappears. It's sometimes curious to know why the readings for the day are grouped together; It took me a while to see the relationship between this first reading and the Gospel passage about Jesus the true vine. Until it occurred to me that there is one startling point of similarity; in the gospel, Jesus is speaking intimately to his friends at the Last Supper. The following day he is crucified and dies, leaving them bereft. Similarly in the Acts story, no sooner is the eunuch converted and baptised, than Philip, the instrument of his conversion, is "snatched away" we are told, by the Spirit of the Lord, leaving the Ethiopian, it might seem, also high and dry!

I remember once as a teenager telling my parish priest about a religious experience I'd had and his reply, "Well you should remember and treasure that because you might never have another." We all know that Christian life is not a matter of prolonged religious ecstasy, life lived with the constant presence of Jesus, or that of reassuring guides sent by the Lord such as Philip was to the Ethiopian. Often our faith journey is lonely and difficult - 'hard and bitter agony' T.S. Eliot says of it. One of the criticisms that used to be made of pentecostal religion is that it leads people to believe that post conversion life is a constant religious high when in fact as John Bunyan knew so well the pilgrim's progress includes not only delectable mountains but sloughs of despond and hills of difficulty as well. Psychiatric wards, I recall from hospital chaplaincy days, frequently admitted young people - victims of enthusiastic religion - who, because they couldn't sustain religious joy, felt deeply guilty that they had lost their faith and blamed themselves!

The Ethiopian, once converted, went on his way, while Philip, we're told, found himself in another place altogether, continuing to spread the good news and sow the seeds of faith, presumably leaving new Christians also to fend for themselves. And we might seem to be in the same boat, riding the waves of our faith journey, each one of us alone, albeit journeying together in the company of other Christians. But the good

news in today's gospel is of course that we are not alone. "I am the vine" says Jesus, "you are the branches." "Abide in me as I abide in you." "Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit." Attached to the vine by prayer, word and sacrament, by the indwelling of Christ's spirit, we are inspired and strengthened, so as to grow in the faith and to bear fruit. We are not alone, for Christ is our lifeblood and without him, as he says, we can do nothing.

The relationship that we as branches have to Jesus, the vine to which we are attached, is a vital and dynamic relationship involving Christ's inspiration and our co-operation and which results in our continual growth as the person God created us to be. But if we are to flourish and bear fruit we should be under no misapprehension about our need for constant pruning - cutting away, cutting back those aspects of ourselves that prevent us from growing and bearing fruit. Jesus also uses the word "cleansing" as well, to mean pruning. It is interesting that the ancients spoke of pruning as a 'cleansing' of the branches. And that for a wine grower to 'cleansing' his vines means that he prunes them to make them grow and be fruitful.

We are cleansed and pruned by word and sacrament. In the first place, as Jesus reminds his disciples, we are cleansed by the word. Jesus says to his friends that you have *already* been cleansed "by the word that I have spoken to you." The entire revelation of God's will in Jesus has already been made known to them in Jesus' teaching. For the disciples, as for us, comments Archbishop Wm Temple, "every discourse they heard from Jesus, every answer he gave to their questions, every rebuke they received from him for their stupidity, faithlessness and arrogance, is in the nature of pruning." And living by that word - if we keep attending to the teaching - we will undergo a lifelong process of cleansing, pruning, transformation. In effect this means, on our part, a discipline of removing old stubborn traits, habits, prejudices and fears and cultivating in ourselves those aspects which are rich in justice, kindness and love. The Jesuit prayer at the end of the day known as the *Examen* focusses simply on the past events of the day, during which we call to mind those encounters in which we have been able to give and receive love; and then recall those incidents in the day which we regret because of our faults. By daily exploring the mystery of ourselves this way, we come to know the Lord is with us. This is to live by the cleansing power of the word, the word that keeps us on track, and the cleansing power of prayer!

But not only is the teaching of Jesus, the vine to which we are attached, the means by which we are constantly cleansed or rather pruned of habits and distractions so that we may concentrate our energies and lead increasingly fruitful lives. We live by and are cleansed by the sacrament too. Sacramental cleansing is given expression in the prayer of humble access in the Book of Common Prayer service of Holy Communion, given expression in the very sentence which regrettably has been deleted in the modern revision. 'Grant us therefore gracious Lord' we pray 'so to eat the flesh of thy dear son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed with his most precious blood.' It is our simple request to God that - by the sacrament of Christ's body and blood - we are constantly cleansed, as much as we are also nourished and strengthened by the life that Jesus offers us in the sacrament. Growth as any gardener knows has to do with pruning as much as with nourishing.

So we are not alone, not deserted and left as orphans in our Christian life; we are branches attached to the true vine and our life is drawn from the stem of the vine to which we are attached. 'Remain with me/abide with me' Jesus implores his friends. The responsibility is ours to remain with Christ through prayer, word and sacrament so that his life will flow into ours and we will continue to grow and bear much fruit, to the glory of God.

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