

29th April 5th Sunday of Easter

Acts 8.26-end

1 John 4.7-end

John 15.1-8

So here we are, over half way through the Easter season, following the story of the early church as they worked out what it meant to follow Jesus. We began with those mysterious post resurrection encounters, and are now noticing the action of the Holy Spirit in the world, which is one of the main themes of the book of Acts.

This of course is central to our own understanding of our relationship with the Trinitarian God – which is further explored in our Gospel reading, where Jesus goes into so much detail about his relationship with the Father, linked to the idea of abiding. You may remember we were introduced to this idea last week in the letter of John, this sense of ‘abiding’, and this becomes central in Jesus’ teaching, both this week and, spoiler alert: we continue with it next week as well.

But before we dive into the Vine, lets just spend a moment in Acts with our Ethiopian eunuch.

I wonder what struck you as you heard this passage? Perhaps you noticed that this is on the road to Gaza? Gaza is of course for us the place of the most appalling tragedy of death and destruction in the past few months, which adds an additional poignancy to the stories we are hearing about those who wanted people to hear about the inclusive and all embracing love of God for all the world – that no one should be left behind, or, as we have just heard from the Epistle of John:

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those 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. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

It is perhaps a reminder how much this tiny part of the world has shaped our understanding of God, and just how complicated that simple sounding command is, to love our fellow humans just as God loves us – so much in fact that God was willing to give everything up for our sake.

And it is this idea, that God willingly gave up everything for – well not just us, but everyone – the stranger, the outsider, the people we distrust or are anxious about in our story of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Now whilst we don’t know his name, we do know some important things about him. We know he is very much an outsider, from a completely different ethnic group than all those we usually meet in our New Testament stories – he is from over 1,500 miles away in North Africa, and from a completely different culture, ruled by a Queen, neither part of the Roman empire nor under the influence of the Jewish culture. Not only that, but as a

eunuch, he would have stood outside all the social norms of even his own society – he would not been part of what the majority of people would call ‘normal’ life. It is perhaps unsurprising that many people have seen this nameless man as representing the marginalised, the misunderstood, the sub-cultures and outsiders.

What has driven him to seek out these scriptures? We will never know the details, but to me, the overriding emotion I see in him is curiosity. He has encountered something in these foreign scriptures which has made him wonder. He reads this from the book of Isaiah:

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

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

And wonders – who is this?

To me, this is the beginning of every faith journey, the wonder, the question, the longing and the yearning that asks to be noticed. And it is perhaps not surprising that this is the passage that has caught his eye, and leads to such excitement – a man who doesn’t fit with the neat accepted social norms discovers that God doesn’t either.

He learns that God was denied justice, was humiliated and silenced by the powers that ruled society. That is explosive stuff. He learns that God’s values are those of love, of inclusion, of abiding – the God who longs to ‘be with’ us, among us.

And that work continues today. God’s purpose is the restoration of justice, giving a voice to those silenced, to bring the outsiders into the fold – telling the gospel story that it was when all was lost that resulted in everything being gained. This is a constant theme in the book of Acts, as they continue to experience the work of the Holy Spirit, active and at work in the world today, inviting us to join in.

And this then directly relates to Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel reading, where he was trying to help us understand how our relationship with God impacts our lives, with the metaphor of the vine. Abide in me as I abide in you Jesus says. All the branches of the vine – like any growing tree or fruit bearing plant, abide together, and bear fruit together. This gives us such a good picture of the Christian life – rooted and grounded in prayer, in discipleship, in a contemplative way of life – this is abiding with Christ. Now one of the key parts of this abiding is our communion with Christ through the Eucharist, as we share the bread and the wine, this is not simply about us as individuals, but it is that connection with the eternal presence of Christ as we take Christ’s body into our body which is the communion, or ‘common union’ - it is a communal moment as we share in the one bread, and acknowledge that we are indeed one body – all branches of the one vine.

And then, Jesus tells us, like the vine, this is what enables us to bear fruit. And we do not do this on our own. All of us, branches together, bearing fruit together – just as we do here

at St Nicolas. It truly is a rather wonderful image that we can take with us into our APCM today – as we have reviewed the way we are as a church – our welcome, our prayer and worship, our connection to the community, our love – it is the way we live out our values, not just once a week on a Sunday, but in all that we do to be Open to God, Open to Each other and Open to our community, today and every day.