

Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

28th April 2024

First Reading: Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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. 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.

Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 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. We love because he first loved us. 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Gospel: St John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

It is not uncommon for people to say that it's a small world, especially with the ever-increasing connectivity provided by modern communications. A hundred years ago, telephones and telegraph were revolutionising communication. Now, to have a video call with friends or relatives on the other side of the world is commonplace. To forge relationships, whether for business or pleasure, with people in faraway places that we have never met, and may never meet, is not unusual. In such terms, we live in an ever-shrinking world.

It has also been said that there is a maximum of six degrees of separation between us and every other person in the world. I don't know if anyone has tried to show if this is accurate, but I did find reference to a study that has shown about three degrees of separation between everyone in the United States, so six degrees for the whole world is probably not unreasonable. What this means is that there is a maximum of 5 other people knowing each other between us and any other person in the world. We are more connected with people than we perhaps realise.

I was reminded of this, in light of current world events, by the opening sentence of today's reading from Acts: 'An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza".' Any mention of Jerusalem or Gaza immediately brings to mind the conflict in the Middle East, and it occurred to me that there are only three degrees of separation between me and those who are dying in that conflict. I know Bryn, Bryn knows Palestinians in the West Bank and some of their friends and relatives are among the dead. For many of you, it will be the same, and for others no more than four degrees of separation. It's a sobering thought. We are more closely connected to that conflict than we might like to think.

Today's readings all have something to tell us about our interconnectedness and our interdependence on one another and our dependence on God. To start with that passage from Acts. In Biblical times, Gaza was the last town before the desert stretching south-west into Egypt. The road from Jerusalem, about 50 miles long, led to the main coastal trading route with Egypt, and the Ethiopian travelling that way probably came from an area in the south of Egypt or Sudan rather than modern-day Ethiopia. We are told that that he was a court official of the Queen of

Ethiopia in charge of her treasury, a position probably equivalent to our Chancellor of the Exchequer. He was likely to have been a proselyte, a God-fearing foreigner, and he was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Whilst travelling, he was reading from Isaiah which would have been written on a scroll. Such scrolls were valuable and difficult to get hold of, so he was clearly a man of influence and wealth. But he was also an outsider as a foreigner and a eunuch.

Philip is prompted by the Holy Spirit to join the Ethiopian in his chariot, where he finds him reading one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah, a prophecy that Jesus had said would be fulfilled in his death. When Philip asks if he understands what he is reading, the Ethiopian acknowledges his dependence on others: 'How can I, unless someone guides me?', something that is surely true for all of us. We are not told what Philip said to him, but we can assume that it was similar to what Peter said in the house of Cornelius that we heard on Easter Day. He clearly connected Jesus with the unjust suffering of the figure in Isaiah, proclaiming Jesus' resurrection as opening the door to God's kingdom for all people, including those considered outsiders, and forgiveness through baptism in his name. So, when they came across a significant pool of water, enough to be immersed in, which would have been a rare sight on that road, the Ethiopian was baptised and went on his way rejoicing. It is another example of the Gospel spreading out from the centre in the very earliest days of the church that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. For Philip too, this would have been a transformational moment as, in this first account of a foreigner becoming a Christian, he recognised that by following the prompting of the Holy Spirit the inclusivity of God's Kingdom was realised. This was a new branch of the vine that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel reading.

This Gospel passage is part of Jesus' final discourse to his disciples before his arrest, and 'I am the true vine' is the last of the 'I am' sayings which are a feature of John's Gospel. This saying speaks both of Jesus' identity and that of his followers, and of the abundant life that he offers. Jesus is the vine and his followers are the branches. The branches are dependent on the vine and cannot exist without it. It must have been an encouragement to those first disciples, as it should be to us, that he used the present tense: you are the branches. Not that you will be the branches sometime in the future, but that you are now. And the role of the branches is to bear fruit. As branches of the vine, we are shaped by the vine-grower, God the Father, who leads us to be fruitful, just as he does for all the other branches.

Linked to this imagery of the vine is the idea of abiding in Jesus, another important image in John's Gospel. The images of both the vine and of abiding express our dependence on Jesus, not as an end in itself, but in order to bear fruit. And, as the Gospel goes on to say after the end of today's passage, that fruit is love.

As we heard in our reading from the first letter of John last week, love is one of its key ideas, and here it is linked to knowledge. At the end of the second sentence of this passage, the author declares 'God is love'. To know God is to discover God's love for us rather than trying to figure out the nature of God. This passage tells us firstly that God is the source of perfect love who sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world – not just Christians, not just human beings, but of all creation. Secondly, that we experience that love as we abide in God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and acknowledging Jesus as Son of God. And finally, being assured of that love, gives us confidence or boldness which is expressed in our love of one another and all the world. 'We love because he first loved us.' Love is perfected in us, not because we love perfectly but because God's perfect love helps us to love despite our fallen nature and imperfections. We are connected to others in love.

Loving in this way is a challenge for us. As we look around the world, at the devastation and suffering in Gaza, at the tragedy of refugees drowning in the Channel, at the brokenness and despair in so many places, it is simply not good enough to say that this is nothing to do with us, that it is not our problem. Only a few degrees of separation connect us to those who are suffering and dying, and we are called by God to love them. At the end of today's reading from the first letter of John it says: '...those who love God must love their brothers and sisters too.' Undoubtedly there are huge challenges, I certainly find it so, but we must ask ourselves what a loving response would look like in each situation and then do whatever is in our power to bring that about.