

Easter V, 2018 Jn.15:1-8 *Abiding in the True Vine*

Why do you think God created anything at all?

Do you think he needed a world to stop him from being bored, or perhaps even lonely?

The Christian tradition has always pushed back against that kind of idea. It has insisted that God doesn't *need* anything. If God *needed* things, he wouldn't be God.

Maybe think instead of why a great artist wants to paint. Or why people in love want to have children. Or why when you hear a really good joke you want to share it.

None of these things are really about *need*. They're instead about something inside us which longs to be outside. Beauty, love, laughter – they long to be shared, it's in their nature to jump out of themselves and to be in others.

Well, those things are pictures of what God is like. God is so full of love and joy and beauty and goodness, that He just longs to jump out of Himself and to live in others. God makes a world, so that He can flood into it. Just like the artist paints to fill the canvas with his vision, so God makes you to fill you with Himself.

And when sin ruins it all, that's why God makes Himself human, and puts Himself right in the heart of our mess. He goes right into the heart of our failure and our lostness – that's what the Cross means – and right there he begins to put us right again. He breathes our real life into us, the life we were made for and which we lost, of love and joy and generosity. As the early Church put it, God became human, that we might become divine. God became human, that we might become divine.

What might that look like in practice?

Well, maybe *a little* like this church.

Think, for instance, of our Malawi project. We've now given more than £15,000 which is going to give health-care and education in one of the poorest countries on earth. We have saved lives, and we will transform countless others. That's what God's life looks like.

Or think, less spectacularly, about our parish share – the money we give to the diocese every year. Now, everyone loves to grumble about parish share and that's understandable – but the truth is that we fund churches in places that could never afford them. We give, so that others can flourish. We should be less grumpy about it. It's what God's life looks like.

And it's not just money, of course. This parish looks *a little* like God's life when we carry each other through sickness, through bereavement, through depression, through all the tough times of life. It looks like it when we welcome strangers. It looks like it when we go into the community around us, when we find those who are hurting and pour love and joy and generosity into them.

I said we look *a little* like God's life. The call of course is always for that little to get bigger and bigger, for us to bear more and more fruit. Being a Christian is *never* finished: there is always more that God is going to do in us and through us.

And the risk of that is that we think we must always do better, and try harder. And there is indeed a place for effort in the Christian life, but that place is *second*. Bearing fruit is not first of all about effort. It is about being part of the Vine. It is about being rooted in Jesus, about His life flowing into us. It is not first of all about *doing* good, but being immersed in good. Not *doing good*, being immersed in good.

The whole message of the Gospel is that there is a great well of generosity and goodness and joy that longs to flow within us, the life of the risen Jesus. The one thing needful is for us to be plumbed into that well, to let it flow. To hold ourselves, at the deepest levels of our being, open to it. As St. John puts it, 'to abide'.

And that won't happen by accident. So what do you do, how do you abide?

John himself gives part of the answer, in Ch.6: 'those who eat my flesh, and drink my blood, abide in me and I in them.' Eat my flesh, and drink my blood. I think that mean 'come to communion', and that's why the eucharist is our central service. Others think Jesus is just using a striking metaphor, that he's trying to say: absorb my teaching, chew it, savour it, digest it like you would food and drink. It's probably a good idea to take it as both. So: are you regular at communion? And are you studying, pondering, absorbing the words of Jesus? If not, the Gospel says, you will bear no fruit.

So that means at least some time, every day, when you deliberately make Jesus the centre of your life. It might only be ten minutes, but there needs to be time when you make him your King; when you figure out what He wants, when you ask Him for help. And if you really don't have ten minutes, most days – well, you need to reorganise your life because that is a sure sign that something other than Jesus is at the centre of things. And if that is so, you will never bear fruit.

Prayer on the one hand, action on the other. If you want to live the life of God, act as if you already do. Make those little deliberate choices every week, every day, to act as if you are a person whose deepest wells are love, joy, Jesus. Forgive that enemy. Raise that direct debit. Welcome that stranger. Make those little gestures that point your life in the direction of Love. You are making the channels through which one day, the great well rush with power and abundance you cannot now imagine.

Prayer, action: stuff we can do. But we do it all simply to tap into the great well of goodness which is God in Jesus, the True Vine. It is He that will flood into us, and make us like Himself. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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