

John 15.1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 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.'

"Abide" isn't a word you hear very often these days. We don't use the noun version, "abode" much either: it seems a little archaic, and even real-estate agents don't seem to use it in their flowery advertising blurb. They say things like 'Desirable property' or 'comfortable residence', and we are encouraged to be impressed at the great value and immaculate presentation while we enjoy the convenient location, gourmet kitchen and landscaped gardens..... But you don't see 'come and abide in this delightful abode' do you?

About the only time you hear the verb these days is when the hymn 'Abide with me' is sung at funerals, on Anzac Day or maybe at the FA Cup Final (when REAL football is played!).

The New Testament Greek word translated here as 'abide' can mean remain, stay, live, dwell, continue, and persist. It has the sense of permanency, of continuing and staying put.

The writer of John's Gospel uses 'abide' eight times in this short passage; and it is used six times in the section of the First Letter of John that we heard today. Both are writing about the vital connection between us and God: the relationship of love that keeps us alive, nourished, and fruitful.

Jesus invites us to live at home in God, as God is at home in us. He uses the familiar image of vine and branches, reminding us of our need to stay connected so that life and love can flow through us.

You don't have to be a gardener to know that if you lop off a branch, the tree will probably be fine, but the branch will eventually die. When we cut flowers, they survive for a while in a vase of water, but eventually they too will wilt and die. They need to be connected to their roots to keep on living.

We are warned that if we cut ourselves off from God by turning away, refusing to love God or other people, then we are cutting ourselves off from our source of life. Then, like dead and withered branches, we are not good for much either.

This image of the vine gives a lovely sense of the divine beneath us, rising up through us, rather than coming down upon us from above. This idea of life being given from below is about nurture and relationship rather than power.

So when Jesus invites us to abide in him, he is inviting us into a relationship of love that will last for ever. His commitment to us is total: he will love us always, no matter what. This is a relationship that depends on love.

In human families we may have relatives we never see, or don't want to see; cousins or uncles or siblings we can't stand or who hate us or have hurt us or whatever.

We are still related to them, even if we wish we weren't. But our relationship with Jesus is either a relationship of love or it doesn't exist at all.

Jesus will always love us, but if we don't respond with love for him and for one another then we have chosen to break off the relationship. Fortunately, we have the story of the prodigal son to remind us that we are always welcomed back with open arms if we should wander off.

What is the fruit that Jesus wants us to bear when we have become his disciples? When we are abiding in Jesus and have that ongoing, life-giving relationship, we can live fruitful lives of loving service. We will live the values of the gospel at home, at work and in our community. We will love our friends and pray for our enemies. We will be generous, open-hearted, and hospitable. We will make new disciples, because others will want to know about the love that overflows from us.

As I heard someone say once, the church is a hospital for sinners. It's where we come to be loved into wellness and wholeness; where our wounds can be tended, and we can find nourishment and nurture. We go out from here to take the love we have been given to anyone who needs it.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was teaching the people not to judge others by pointing out the speck in someone's eye whilst not noticing the log in their own eye. He went on to talk about good trees bearing good fruit and bad trees bearing bad fruit, saying, "Thus you will know them by their fruits."

Jesus did not like hypocrisy and said some harsh things to those he accused of being hypocrites. He demands integrity of us, his followers, so what we say needs to match what we do. Others should be able to 'know us by our fruits': to see that we are genuine in our desire to care for the poor, the sick and those in need.

When a leader or a politician talks publicly about their faith and how they pray for people, how the Bible is important to them in their life and work, we might like to look at the kind of fruit they produce. Do their words match their actions?

Do they welcome the stranger and give hospitality to the refugee? Do they care for the poor and ensure people are not further punished when they can't get a job? Do they ensure that tax revenue supports healthcare, aged care, and vulnerable members of the community? Do they ensure justice, fairness, and equity so that wealthy corporations pay their share of tax?

Are their decisions evidently based on the Law of Love?

We need to pray for our leaders, that those who identify as Christians will abide in Jesus and maintain their relationship and connection to the Vine; and if their actions are not congruent with their words we must call them to account.

As we gather together this morning in worship and prayer around God's table, and as we give thanks for Jesus the true vine who connects and nourishes us, we pray that our lives will bear fruit that brings love and compassion to the world.

The Lord be with you.