

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield
10th of May 2009

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

The writings of the Apostle John make up only ten percent of the New Testament, but they provide one-third of its references to love. The first letter of John, which we're reading our way through in these weeks of Easter, offers us both an absolute command to love and a description of what love looks like. John uses the word "love" as a verb more often than as a noun. He isn't writing about the feeling. He's writing about living it out, about love in action. As last week's reading said: "Let us love not in word or speech but in truth or action".¹ In that part of the letter, John gave one example of that, asking "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"² This week's reading gives us another example of what loving in action looks like: "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."³

Our faith can only be known by our love. Our love can only be known by the actions it prompts. Where do we see signs of God's presence? In acts of love. How will people know that we in the church believe in God? By seeing the way that we love. And not just the way we love God, the way we gather together to worship and praise; we'll be known as Christians by the way we love other people. Perhaps fortunately, this is not love as a feeling. We aren't called to force ourselves to feel warm and affectionate for everyone. We're called to live out our love. Love in action is what the church commonly refers to as mission.

Loving other people, even if we *are* talking about love as a verb rather than as a noun, as action, rather than feeling, isn't always easy. We're called to love not just the people we like, but the people who annoy us, the people who scare us, the people who are different from us. Loving those people can be difficult. Yet that's exactly what Philip does in today's reading from the book of Acts. Led by the Spirit, he guides an Ethiopian eunuch through the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He approaches an Ethiopian, a man of another race. He approaches the treasurer of the Ethiopian queen, Candace, an official to a foreign power. He approaches a eunuch, a man described in one of the commentaries I read this week as someone of "complicated gender".⁴ Despite being a powerful court official in his own land, this was a man of marginalised social status, and a foreigner. Yet, led by the Spirit, Philip offers him help. Presumably the Spirit was also leading the eunuch, because he responds to the rather rude question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" with openness and welcome. Philip, in his guiding and his baptism of this racial and sexual stranger, is giving one example of loving his brother, as John advises his community to do.

In writing to his community about love, John is drawing on the teaching of Jesus, whose message was always one of love. But just as the apostle talks about love as an activity, rather than a feeling, as something that can be hard work rather than something warm and fuzzy, so Jesus' words about love are challenging. Today's gospel reading talks about "abiding" and "pruning". Both ideas can be frightening.

"Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus says, drawing on Isaiah's vision of Israel as the vine for which God prepared a fertile hill.⁵ Abiding is an old-fashioned word, and it's a demanding word. It doesn't just mean staying or resting. It means persevering, lasting, enduring, sticking with

¹ 1 John 3:18.

² 1 John 3:17.

³ 1 John 4:20.

⁴ William Brosend, "Unless someone guides me," *Christian Century*, May 10, 2000.

⁵ Isaiah 5:1-2.

it, standing firm. This is one reason why the words from the first letter of John: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” are heard so often at weddings. When couples are married, they promise to persevere in their relationship, in good times and in bad. The Church does recognise that sometimes divorce is the only healthy option for a marriage. But the Church marries people expecting that in most cases they will abide with each other. Sickness, poverty, no longer having the same feelings of being “in love” – none of these are reasons for a marriage to end. Marriage is about abiding love.

But marriage is only one example of a relationship in which we are called to abide in love. Jesus is talking to his disciples, on the night before his death, in the Farewell Discourse in which he gives them his last teachings. They are to abide in Jesus, as he abides in them. This is the call to the church, to the Christian community, to be the branches on the vine that is Jesus. We cannot bear fruit without being attached to the vine; we cannot bear fruit as individual branches, without the rest of the vine. The vine is an image of community; bearing fruit is something that we do together. The individualism of modern life might try to convince us that we don’t need others to live lives that bear fruit. Today’s reading reminds us that “the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine”. The love that we are called to live out is the love of the community.

It’s ironic that most of the disciples *don’t* abide. Peter denies Jesus three times, very far from abiding in love, in the vine. But that doesn’t matter. Peter is forgiven, and asked to feed Jesus’ lambs and tend his sheep. Abiding, persevering, lasting, enduring, sticking with it, standing firm, this can be hard to do. But if we fail at it, we will be forgiven, and regrafted into the vine.

As branches we’re not just called to abide in the vine. We can also expect to be pruned. Jesus told his disciples that God would prune every branch that bears fruit to make it bear more fruit. Every quality that prevents us living as the community of God, that prevents us from loving actively, will be pared away. Every quality that enables us to live as the people of God will be strengthened by the pruning. That is not, of course, always a pleasant process. Immediately after today’s reading ends Jesus goes on to say: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love”.⁶ That’s frightening, remembering how the Father loved Jesus. God’s love did not give Jesus an easy, pain free, life. But no one ever said that abiding in the vine would be easy or painless. Abiding in Jesus involves losing parts of ourselves, the selfish, self-centred parts that prevent us from loving others. But that pruning, that pain, comes from, and is a sign of, God’s love.

Love always begins with the God who loved us so much. In Jesus, God chose to enter history and love us. In love, Jesus welcomes us into a community whose life is marked by a mutual love, a deep abiding, and a constant struggle to ever greater care. We love others in response to the love that God offers us. Love generates love; we are so loved by God that we can live out that love freely, without fear. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Abiding and being pruned and not hating our sisters and brothers can all be difficult. But all these things grow from the love God has for us. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,” John writes to his community. Love creates love, and our love is only a response to the great love of God for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ John 15:9.