

in the vine
a sermon preached on the
5th Sunday of Easter
3 May 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:26-32, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

At the surface level the essence of today's gospel is easy enough to grasp. As the eternal Word - who was in the beginning with God¹ – Christ is the true vine, in whom connection to the Divine life is to be found. Being connected to the Divine Ground of Being is bound to produce fruit that will last. Love will be simultaneously the source, the means, and the outcome of human life – a real sense of intimacy with God and with sisters and brothers assured, even perhaps to the point of life laid down for friends. Conversely, not being connected to this vine will of course amount to barrenness, withering, and fire.

I want to draw our attention today to a dynamic beneath this surface level.

Though John's Jesus does something unique with it, the image of the vine is from the Hebrew Scriptures.² While vine imagery is a metaphor for relationship with God, yes, it also came to represent Israel's ethnic uniqueness and 'election' as God's 'chosen'. Vine imagery became tribal identity imagery. Taken into Christian teaching, it's hardly surprising that this tribal emphasis was picked up and translated into the church's 'election' as God's 'chosen' – fuelling Christian tribalism. It was probably inevitable that 'abiding in the vine' would become confused with Christian imperialism and scalp-hunting. Paul may well have counselled the church at Rome to remember that it's merely an offshoot of Israel the vine³, but it seems that was not enough to prevent a virulent piety with yet another exclusive tribal identity claim. We are now the inheritors of a world increasingly carved up between the followers of the three famous venerable celestial patriarchal deities – YHWH, God the Father, and Allah - all making exclusive tribalistic truth claims, with the horrendous consequences that are all too clear to see.

I suggest that the literalising, externalising of vine imagery is the lethal spiritual error - by which Christian tradition has in fact turned away from the Love into which we are invited to abide. Reflecting for a moment on John the evangelist's use of this image, it has all the hallmarks of a deeply intimate experience. Though he surely draws upon the Hebrew scriptural tradition – his use of the image is both different, and luminous. There is something ecstatic in John's utterance. John has surely experienced within himself something of the astonishing intimacy about which he writes. Equally, he must have also experienced the intense and painful fire of knowing the severing of that intimacy.

We would say now that something spontaneous erupted within John's psyche – something by which he experienced a direct encounter with what we Christian call God the Father, with the Ultimate Source, with what our tradition also calls the Sacred Centre. I spoke last week about the centrality of mystical experience: in today's gospel we are privileged witnesses to John's mystical encounter with the Sacred Centre. The same quality and the sheer exuberance and insight of his outburst can be observed in many a Christian mystic down the ages: Paul's being caught up into the 'third heaven',⁴ giving rise to his extraordinary claim that he no longer lives, but that Christ lives in him;⁵ John of the Cross' experience of the 'living flame of love' which gives rise to intimate experience of God in the 'dark night of the soul; the unknown English mystic whose 'cloud of unknowing' is the source of Divine vision; Teilhard

¹ John 1:2

² e.g. Isaiah, Hosea 10:1, Jeremiah 5:10, 6:9, 12:10, Ezekiel 15:1-8, 17:3-10, 19:10-14, Psalm 80:8-18, Song of Songs

³ Romans 11:18

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:2-4

⁵ Galatians 2:20

de Chardin's blazing experience of fire which produces an astonishing unitive vision. We could go on all day recounting such experiences and insights.

What John has experienced is that the source of all creativity and life and love lies in a direct encounter with the Sacred Centre. As long as we are connected to that Centre we experience life's unfolding creativity. When we are cut off from the Sacred Centre withering is inevitable. I am sure that the myriad of outer problems our world faces are a direct consequence of our disconnection from the Sacred Centre – our own personal sacred centre, as well as the collective experience of being cut off from the Centre. The planet herself is giving us very clear signs – if only we were capable of paying attention!

At its best, Christian sacramental life is an aid to building and strengthening the connection with the sacred centre within each of us. My suggestion to those who come for spiritual direction in this regard is straightforward. When you gather around the Altar - though I assure you, this becomes much more do-able, much more real, when we are not arranged according to a medieval pattern, in tram seats facing 'the front', mere observers of something taking place 'up there', when we are not sitting twenty metres away, constrained within rigid seating, when we do in fact stand *around* the Altar! - give up all those useless efforts to conjure up 'holy thoughts'. Rather, hold in your hands your own inner reality – whatever that may be. When we offer what and who we really are – including, and especially, all the 'forbidden' and dark and unacceptable feelings and thoughts – we are much more likely to be connected to the Sacred Centre. For the connection to be real, it must be organic – it must come from our own ground.

That is to say, the vine is a reality within our own interior – it is this connection to our own inner reality that will be the only true basis of any meaningful and lasting connection to others.

Our capacity to embody the 'love command' only gets so far as an act of moral will. It's fulfilment is the fruit of being connected to our own sacred centre, an organic connection to the ground of our being – and thus to The Sacred Centre. Everything – including laying down some aspect of our lives, when called to do so – naturally grows and flows when we are organically connected to the Centre.

I have no doubt that the world is tired of Christians attempting to expand their market share – with exclusive truth claims, and the arrogant claim to being God's *only* 'chosen'. On the other hand, I am sure that our materialist, superficial, self-centred and entertained-to-death world is crying out for genuine connection to the Sacred Centre – to the Vine who is the inner reality that may be experienced by all people. By baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, *we* are the bearers of this liberating good news to a soul-sick and overfed-but-hungry world.

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