

Sunday 21 May 2006: The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Abide in My Love

Reading: John 15. 9-17

During the last few weeks, as some of you know, I have been involved in the process of packing and moving my belongings here to my flat at St. Martin-in-the Fields, the church which will be my new home. There were many boxes of memories and accumulated *stuff* that when I returned from the South Pacific I had stored in my mother's loft. But what do you do with it all? What do you do for example with boxes of letters from friends and family going back almost twenty years? I had intended clearing them out but very soon I found myself reading them: rediscovering stages and experiences I had almost forgotten and bringing them alive again. And then, as I was doing this rewinding, I suddenly saw the handwriting of one of my best friends from the Solomon Islands who had died three years ago while working for peace on the island of Guadalcanal and my heart leapt. I had received the letter shortly before he died. At the time it had seemed like a normal letter, telling news, expressing friendship and the hope we would meet together again, but now as I reread this letter I hung on every word. He seemed to be speaking beyond a time and particular context. I was filling those words with the knowledge of his death and his words had a new significance and meaning. They seemed precious – words from beyond death, as if from eternity. They filled me not with grief but with a sense of hope and courage that somehow our friendship continued beyond death and I wanted to read his words again each time discovering something new.

Our Gospel for this week is like that letter but even more so. It is Jesus' farewell words to his disciples before his death. For almost four chapters from John 14-17 he speaks to them. Jesus' words spiral round and round, returning again and again to themes of love and parting - his relationship with God, his relationship with these his friends and disciples and through them us. Eternal words. His longings for them, his hopes, fears and the desire that those he most loves will not be lost.

For several weeks I have known that I will be preaching on this my second Sunday at St Martins. I read Christ's words through several weeks ago with that initial panic of not knowing what I would speak about. But as often happens with scripture, if you give it space, if you give it time, it's not really about what you will say but about what it says to you and how these words speak across 2000 years, speak across a terrible death upon a cross and through the knowledge of resurrection. For Christ's words are waiting for each one of us to complete them in our own lives and the more we think about them, the more they open up for us.

And the words which kept returning to me again and again throughout the last few weeks of moving were these:

As the Father has loved me
so I have loved you
Abide in my love.

And I found myself holding on to those words "abide in my love:" live in it, stay with that love, hold onto it, don't abandon it, it is why you are here.

Things in your life change- like moving, like changing jobs, like learning a new set of skills, like leaving behind people you care about, like a parting, a death: humbling experiences,

experiences of vulnerability and the impermanence of our lives, yes experiences all of us at times will face - and yet beneath that changing surface, beneath the confusions and the anxieties Christ's words to his disciples "Abide in my love." It is like a call to deeper level of belonging, a deeper connectedness. Of course all that is around us seems to demand our attention and our time, and often seems to consume us. But at our very centre there is this call of Christ: to belong to a relationship which is beyond the transient. And the mystery is that somehow although in our lives we move on there is a deeper meeting place of all that we are and all we are called to be.

Jesus says "Abide in my love."

One thing which has struck me since moving to London is of course how busy it is! You don't fully grasp the extent of that business until you live in it next to a building site. This city never stops or sleeps despite Ken's congestion charges. On my first night I lay awake listening to shouts and voices, drunks and sirens, street cleaning lorries, dustbins and reversing delivery trucks and wondered how **anyone** ever slept in this place. But of course it is not just London which is busy it is our lives too: lives more driven than ever before as we rush to fit in everything that is expected of us. Instant communication requires instant answers with no space for a turn around; then rushing to get the children to school; to fit in the planned activities, to arrange the logistics of day evening and weekends; to answer the e-mails, the answer phone and the mobile text messages; to down-load more information, more films, more music, more channels, more news on the hour than ever before; the workouts, the weight training, the twenty four hour supermarkets and consumer parks replacing a simple walk in the park.

Jesus says "Abide in my love."

Christ is calling us not to abandon the world but to find at the very centre of our lives his presence and his love. And this requires a conscious decision on our part to make a place and a space for Christ. W B Yeats writes that when:

The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.¹

Our lives need that centre, that still point where we are grounded, where we can listen for and discern truth. Brother Roger of the Taize Community in France, over and over again uses the image that our faith in Christ is like "a wellspring in the desert" and that it is from this well spring of Christ's presence that we receive the water that will give life and meaning to everything we do. And this spring is pure gift.

Every morning at 8 o'clock at St Martin-in-the-Fields we say Morning Prayer. It's a special time ... quiet ... a sacred time. The light floods through the east window above the altar and a simple prayer is offered. And I have noticed each day how there are homeless people who come into the Church and sit here, read the newspaper or rest. And their presence adds a lot to the morning prayer. They could go somewhere else but they have chosen to be here for it is a place of peace and sanctuary. There is a great deal of wisdom in that presence, they are not doing anything they are simply **being** here.

Abbot Jamison, (who is the abbot of Worth Abbey who some of you may remember from the television programme *The Monastery* last year) calls this space for God "sanctuary" derived

¹ W. B. Yeats: *The Second Coming*

from the word *sanctus* meaning holy, holy space, sacred time. Sanctuary also means a place of refuge, a place of safe-keeping.² That refuge is not an escape from the world but Christ's gift to us at the very heart of the world. Jesus says: If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love... This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." The love of Christ for us is the source of our love for the world. Christ is **not** saying that unless you do what I say I will not love you, rather he is saying that love which begins with God needs to be reciprocated on our part. He is saying "when you love me, when you love as I love, then you will live in my abiding love. It will be at your well spring, your constant, your home – your sanctuary deeper than the storm. It will ground you and centre you and become the source of your relationship with the world.

In the Church of Melanesia at the end of the Eucharist the Brothers always sing "Remember all the day long that Jesus is in you" And you are in Him.

In the middle of our busy lives, in thanksgiving, in humility and in awe we seek again the sanctuary of Christ and abide in his love. Pope Benedict XVI took love as the theme of his first encyclical letter. He ends that letter with this prayer:

Show us Jesus
Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
So that we too can become capable of true love
And be the fountains of living water in the midst of a thirsting world.³
Amen

² Christopher Jamison: *Finding Sanctuary*; Weidenfeld and Nicolson; London; 2006

³ Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est*.