

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Collect: Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acts 8.26–end: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ ³¹ He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’ ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Gospel: John 15.1–8: ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Reflection by Reverend Keir Dow:

Anyone else feeling rather pruned of late? Don't get me wrong. I lead a blessed life with a wonderful family and job and friends, for all of which I am profoundly grateful. And yet...

And yet there was another devastating covid situation, this time in India, with so many dead and so many more left in dire circumstances. And we just passed the one-anniversary of the lockdown here in England. And the fire in the hospital in Baghdad. And I heard from several friends recently who are dealing with pretty difficult things at work or home. And....

In the words of Calum, my 14 year old son, “Here's the thing”: At any given moment, even when things are going relatively well, there are still so many difficult things with which to contend in this life and it often feels like being pruned.

Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just feels like being cut, cut down by life's tragedies great or small, cut down by disappointment or despair, cut down by illness or job loss or other circumstances beyond our control and left to wither and die.

It's easy to read this passage as one of judgment and threat. But I think the thrust of the passage is promise. Why? It all has to do with context. First, the context of the narrative: Jesus is offering these words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He knows what is going to happen – both to himself and to his flock – and they do not. They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting but that they will survive, even flourish.

The second context is that of the community for which John writes. Because by the time they hear these words they have already been scattered, likely thrown out of their synagogue, and have had plenty of reason to feel like they've been abandoned. But John writes to assure them that while they have indeed been cut, it is the pruning for more abundant fruit and life.

No doubt that was hard to believe, as there was very little evidence available to the disciples or John's community that they had not been abandoned. And no doubt it still is hard to believe on our end as well, as so much of life simply tears at us with no evidence that it is toward some more fruitful future.

But amongst this uncertainty and distress, Jesus still invites us – actually, not just invites but *promises* us – that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us like a vine clings to a tree so that we endure, persevere, and even flourish among these present difficulties.

"Here's the thing": if Jesus had only said, "abide in me or else," that would be a different matter. But it's not. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "as I abide in you." This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens, God in Jesus will bring all things to a good end.

Which is **not** to say that everything happens for a reason. Rather, it is to say that no matter what happens, we have God's promise in Jesus to work for good. Keep in mind, after all, that these words are said just before Jesus goes to the cross. And I would argue that the cross was not simply a part of some larger plan, but rather the chief example of God's commitment to wrestle life and hope from the very place that seems most devoid of life and hope.

Not everyone feels that way, I know. There has been countless voices over the centuries that argue that the cross is some kind of mechanism by which God finds a way to forgive us despite how wretched we are. Honestly, I think most of that theologising is academic pious nonsense, meant to help us understand and even encompass something that is absolutely beyond our control or understanding. If the cross means anything, I think it means that God chose not to sit back in heaven, removed from the pain and paucity of our mortal, free, and difficult life in this world, but rather came in Christ to be joined to it – the ups and downs, the hopes and disappointments, the frailties and faults of our life in this world – so that we would know of God's unending commitment to us. The cross was not the instrument that made it possible for God to love us; the cross is evidence and testimony to just how much God already loved us and God's promise to be with us through all things. Just so, the resurrection is the promise that no matter how much tragedy we endure, these hardships will not have the last word.

Let's be honest, this is a hard passage to preach. But let's also be honest and say that this can be a hard life to live, and at times it's helpful to hear once again that the suffering we endure is not wasteful cutting but pruning for a more abundant future in the same way the pruned vine produces more and lovelier wine and, "Here's the thing": no matter what happens, Jesus will not abandon us.