

5th May 2024 – Morning Service

The Vine

Rev Andrew Roberts

[Prayers and notes on Acts adapted from ROOTs for Worship and used with permission]

Prayer of Approach

God of surprises, we come as we are but wanting to be more like Jesus. Journey with us as we seek to be surprised by you today. As we challenge ourselves to respond to your surprising love, give us grace to welcome others into your kingdom. **Amen.**

StF 451 – Open the eyes of my heart Lord

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,	To see You high and lifted up,	Holy, holy, holy,
Open the eyes of my heart.	Shining in the light of Your glory.	Holy, holy, holy,
I want to see you	Pour out Your power and love,	Holy, holy, holy,
I want to see you.	As we sing holy, holy, holy,	I want to see You.

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Prayer of Adoration

Amazing God, who created every language, who knows our every question before we even think it, who understands not only our words, but the thoughts, hopes, dreams and fears behind them. You hear the loudest cry and the smallest sigh. We are blown away by your love. We long to share it, especially with those who think they are beyond the limits. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Lord God, sometimes even though the evidence of you is staring us in the face, battering our eardrums, we still deliberately close our minds.

Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.

We come into your presence, sometimes we question whether others are accepted by you, and whether we are ourselves. We might have too little self-esteem, or too much self-importance.

Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.

Sometimes we just don't want to walk in your light. We see what we want to see, not what you would have us see. We block out what is right before our eyes. Our hearts are ice and we don't feel the all-consuming heat of your spirit.

Forgive us, and challenge us, good Lord.

Come to us and accept our confession. Open the door to your glorious light and life. You carry complete forgiveness and healing in your wings. We thankfully and humbly receive you now, Lord God. **Amen.**

StF 447 – Jesus be the centre

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|---|---|
| 1) Jesus, be the Centre,
Be my Source, be my Light, Jesus. | 3) Jesus, be my vision,
Be my path, be my guide, Jesus. |
| 2) Jesus, be the centre,
Be my hope, be my song, Jesus. | 4) Jesus, be the Centre,
Be my Source, be my Light, Jesus. |

*Ch) Be the fire in my heart,
Be the wind in these sails;
Be the reason that I live,
Jesus, Jesus.*

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Reading: Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Notes from ROOTs

This is the climax of the story of Peter and Cornelius, aptly entitled by James Dunn in his *The Acts of Apostles*, 'The Conversion of Peter and the Acceptance of Cornelius'. Peter's surprising vision, urging him to eat all kinds of creatures, clean and unclean, is followed by an invitation from this Gentile God-fearer. When Peter finds out that he has been invited at the behest of an angel, he begins to '*truly understand that God shows no partiality*', and he preaches '*peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all*' (10:34-36). As he speaks, Cornelius the Gentile centurion, together with his relatives and close friends, receives the Holy Spirit. Peter recognises the work of God in this outpouring '*even on the Gentiles*'. He realises, as he will later explain to the church in Jerusalem, that the Spirit is telling him '*not to make a distinction between them and us*' (11:12), and they are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. When Peter tells the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem what has happened, he says, '*who was I that I could hinder God?*' (11:17), and hearing this they fall silent. Then they praise God who '*has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life*' (11: 18). God's word gradually unfolds and is increasingly accepted, by Peter's change of mind, in Cornelius' commitment, and in the renewed praises of the church in Jerusalem. Peter remembers the word of Jesus, who had said, '*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*' (11:16, see Luke 3:16 and Acts 1:5).

Comment

As we approach Pentecost many of us will be praying the apparently simple prayer, 'Come Holy Spirit'. This reading reminds us that if we really mean what we pray, this can be a brave and risky prayer to pray. As Jesus himself reminds us the '*Spirit blows where the Spirit chooses*' (John3:7). When the Spirit came at Pentecost there were all sorts of surprises and consequent challenges for Peter and his fellow disciples. We should not expect anything different when we receive the Spirit afresh today.

StF 385 – Holy Spirit we welcome you

- 1) Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Move amongst us with holy fire
As we lay aside all earthly desires.
Hands reach out and our hearts aspire,
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
- 2) Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Let the breeze of Your presence blow,
That Your children here might truly know
How to move in the Spirit's flow,
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
- 3) Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.
Please accomplish in us today
Some new work of loving grace, we pray.
Unreservedly -- have Your way,
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome You.

Reading: John 15:1-17

'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. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'

Notes from ROOTs

Today's passage begins with Jesus declaring '*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower*' (15:1). The imagery of bearing fruit continues, and is further related to doing what is commanded. Wealthy pilgrims to the Temple added golden grapes to the golden vines above the sanctuary door, but Jesus' followers bear fruit with a more personal connection to 'the true vine'. There is an implied contrast between observing commandments associated with Temple worship and keeping the commandment to love as we are loved. It is expressed in the contrast Jesus makes between servants who rightly do what they are told and friends who are 'in the know' and enjoy participating in God's purposes. It is worth remembering that the fruit of the vine that is Jesus is not produced to sustain the branches that are his disciples. As Isaiah's 'love-song' to Israel as an unfruitful vineyard (5:1-7), and Jesus' parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-44, Mark 12:1-11, Luke 20:9-18) make clear, the fruit is produced for the planter of the vineyard. '*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples*' (John 15:8).

Sermon

At the heart of this reading is the word 'abide'. It occurs at least nine times in the passage. Abiding is not a static activity. Jesus' command to abide in him and his love is in the present continuous tense in the Greek – a reminder that our relationship with him needs to be renewed each new day (just like any meaningful relationship of course). Jesus does not explain here how we do this and nor does John offer any explanatory commentary. However, in verse 10 we have an important clue as to how we can continuously abide in Jesus. Jesus links the keeping of his Father's commandments with abiding in the Father's love. So, for us to abide in Jesus will involve continuously living out his teaching.

Another vital way in which Jesus demonstrably abided in his Father's love during his time on earth was through prayer. The esteemed Scottish biblical commentator James Dunn argued that there were two things that more than any other marked Jesus out as unique. One was his sense of sonship and the other was his prayer life. These two things were, of course, inextricably linked. Jesus prayed in the way that he did because he knew himself to be God's beloved Son - a fact affirmed at his baptism, transfiguration and crucifixion – and refreshed that knowledge and relationship on a daily basis.

This is very apparent in the model prayer he gave to his disciples which begins with the intimate address 'Abba Father' and includes the petition for 'daily bread'.

I may be a bit old school here but after six decades of following Jesus I still think there is no substitute for the daily habit of prayer and reading the bible. Some might want to suggest adding the breaking of bread into the mix here – something John Wesley for example did on a daily basis. I can see why this might be very helpful (and remember breaking bread does not have to always involve drinking wine too) but I can't be hypocritical and urge a practice on others that is not part of my daily discipleship.

The fruits of abiding

Abiding is not the be all and end all of everything. It was not for Jesus and should not be for us. This is not some sort of cosy divine love in. The purpose of abiding is to bear fruit and in this pivotal passage Jesus speaks of several different forms of fruitfulness. We have the fruitfulness of:

- Answered prayer (verse 7).
- Worship (verse 8 – my Father is glorified).
- Discipleship (verse 8).
- Self-giving love (verse 13).

As Geoff Beard is fond of pointing out there are no chapter and verse numbers or headings in the original biblical texts. So, it is possible to read verses 18-27 as part of this narrative of fruitfulness. If we do so we will realise that faithful discipleship can also result in the bitter fruit of opposition.

More fruit

Vines are living, growing organisms. In this passage Jesus appropriates the image of the vine for himself. 'I am the True Vine' is the bold declaration. The image of the vine thus becomes the prime image or motif for the body of Jesus' disciples (i.e. the Church) in the fourth gospel. Jesus makes it clear that his Father's desire – and by extension the desire of the Son and the Spirit (see John 14:15-17) -- is for there to be 'more fruit'. Healthy vines grow, Healthy vines bear more fruit. And so do healthy churches.

Pruning

As anyone even vaguely aware of what makes a good garden will know, pruning is vital to flourishing. I guess many of us will not have vines in our gardens but we will have plenty of other plants that need a good trim every now and then to keep them healthy and to enable them to grow further. As a family of Churches across the Vale of Stour Circuit we rejoice in signs of new life and growth. We praise God for new people attending worship, new acts of service to the community and increasing numbers at some bible study groups to name just three pieces of good news. And we also recognise the many challenges that we face and in particular the challenge of how we can do all that we are called to do in the light of very stretched resources.

As we continue to journey through a time of review, the gospel passage for today has been brought to our attention. A passage that reminds us so clearly that the Church of Jesus is in essence relational, centred on the divine relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and their relationship with humanity. This is and should always be primary in our thinking. Whatever else is needed is secondary to this. John 15 is also so pertinent and helpful because it is both hopeful and realistic. Hopeful because in this passage the Lord holds out a vision of new life, growth and the fruits of practical, prayerful love. Realistic, because to return to the theme of pruning, for there to be new growth there has to be pruning and the willingness to lay down things that are precious in order for other things to flourish.

No longer worrying about the roof

In Cornwall a Methodist Chapel had declined to the point where it needed to close that others might flourish. This is never, ever, an easy thing and must always be handled with as much care as possible.

Most of the members realised what needed to happen but one gentleman, let's call him Jim, was particularly resistant. I don't know if he ever used that ever so sad phrase 'over my dead body' but he might have done. He was particularly fond of the building. Eventually the chapel simply had to close. To his great credit Jim transferred to another nearby chapel which welcomed him and others warmly and benefited from a sense of renewal due to those who joined. One day the minister sat next to him at the end of the service and asked how he was getting on. Tears formed in Jim's eyes as he said 'I now realise we should have done this years ago. I so love being able to concentrate on worship again and not be sat worrying about when the roof is going to start leaking again'.

Jesus says 'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit'. May it be so. Amen.

StF 678 – Come all who look to Christ today

- 1) Come, all who look to Christ today,
Stretch out your hands, enlarge your mind,
Together share his living way
Where all who humbly seek will find.
- 2) Come, all who will from every place;
Find here new powers of unity,
Accept the Spirit's strong embrace
Which binds us in community.
- 3) Come, young and old from every church,
Bring all your treasuries of prayer,
Join the dynamic Spirit's search
To press beyond the truths we share.
- 4) Bring your traditions' richest store,
Your hymns and rites and cherished creeds;
Explore our visions, pray for more,
Since God delights to meet fresh needs.
- 5) Come, trust in Christ and live in peace,
Anticipate that final light
When strife and bigotry shall cease,
And faith be lost in praise and sight.

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Prayers of Intercession

To your beautiful but hurting world;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To Israel, Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To those who are ill, in hospital or hospice;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To those watching over loved ones who suffer;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To your Church Universal that she may be renewed;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To this Circuit as we seek your way forward;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
To the parts of the vine that need pruning with care;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
For parts where new growth needs nurturing;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
For those who lead us and those who serve us;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come
And upon each of us who make this our prayer today;
Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

Song – Alleluia, alleluia, opening our hearts to Him

Ch) Alleluia alleluia

Opening our hearts to Him

Singing alleluia alleluia

Jesus is our King

1) Create in us O God
A humble heart that sets us free
To proclaim the wondrous majesty
Of our Father in heaven

2) We bear the name of Christ
Justified we meet with Him
His words and presence calm our fear
Revealing God our Father here

3) Let kindred voices join
Honouring the Lamb of God
Who teaches us by bread and wine
The mystery of His body

4) Pour out Your Spirit on us
Empowering us to live as one
To carry Your redeeming love
To a world enslaved by sin

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Blessing

Now may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us, and this world that God loves, this day and for evermore. **Amen**