29 April 2018: College Communion

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

1 John 4: 7-21; John 15: 1-8

Neil McCleery, Assistant College Chaplain

I am the true vine. Abide in me as I abide in you.

In the 12th century Basilica of San Clemente in Rome there is one of the best-preserved and most striking examples of mosaic work of the period, probably constructed by Byzantine artists. It fills the apse of the Church, the large half dome at the East end above the Altar, and it draws your eye, initially to the central image, the cross, relatively small when compared to the size of the entire mosaic, or to the larger figures of the Apostles and Prophets that surround the apse. What draws the eye next is the proliferation of spirals that emanate from the central cross, and from the figure of the crucified. These vines spiral out in neat concentric spirals filling the apse, the gaps between occupied by
images of animals and birds, peacocks and deer, fruit and plants, a shepherd with his flock, a peasant woman feeding her hens, a soldier armed with a sword, a noble with his stewards, theologians and spiritual writers, little putti or cherubs. In short, all life is here. In amongst the expanding and expansive vines are representative images of all of 11th century life, and everyday life at that, the natural world, the worlds of the farming peasant, the ruling nobility, the church, and even the pre-Christian ‘civilized’ pagan world, as represented by the putti. It all draws its life from the tree of life, the cross and the crucified Saviour, at once both small and hidden in amongst the vast web of vines, and absolutely core and fundamental, at the physical centre of the mosaic and central to the idea that the mosaic portrays, the crux one might say, from whence all life flows.

The image of the vine that Jesus uses in the Gospel passage for today is multi-layered and complex: it comes as part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel, the teaching given as Jesus spent his last night with his friends before his death on Good Friday, and is also the last of the ‘I am’ statements: I am the Good Shepherd (as we heard last week), I am the Bread of Life, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The last verse of chapter 14, immediately prior to the ‘I am the true vine’ statement has Jesus say ‘Rise, let us be on our way’, following the conclusion of the Last Supper. It is tempting to imagine the ragged group making their way towards Gethsemane past the Temple Gate, into which a great golden vine was carved, the taste of wine still fresh on their lips, singing a psalm, as we are told in the narrative, perhaps psalm 80 with its image of Israel as the vineyard whose hedges are broken down allowing passers-by to pick the grapes. An image of degradation and ignominy that can be seen in the light of the new covenant instead as an image of mercy and inclusivity – of course, in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants which explicitly paints Israel as a vineyard in need of new management.

One can imagine Jesus pointing to the elaborate carving and contrasting the old covenant of the law, the vine of the family tree of the tribes of Israel, the tree of Jesse, with the new and better covenant of grace that would be established temporally over the following hours, and out of which would come a vine whose hedges would be broken down, and onto which all may be grafted. Indeed, the Latin inscription below the San Clemente apse reads: ‘Compare the Church of Christ to this vine; the Law made it wither but the Cross made it bloom.’ In this new vine, salvation relies not on fear of the law and its repercussions, necessitating sin and hell and death writ large, but rather a salvation that lives in grace, in love, in life.
In the reading we’ve heard from the 1st letter of John this contrast is made clear: there is no room for fear in love. The atoning sacrifice made once for all upon the cross is outlined by John not in terms of payment owed, or of anger, or of retribution, but in terms of love. We have no need to fear a vengeful God, to be fearful of what might become of us, of what punishment awaits us ‘for fear has to do with punishment’, and we are told that there is none of that here. Instead ‘God send his only Son into the world that we might live through him’. Salvation is no longer understood in terms of transaction, but rather in terms of belonging. In belonging to Christ we may live through him.

In baptism, we identify with Christ’s saving death and resurrection, we plunge under the water and die to sin and self, and come up to the surface gasping for air, and breathing in the new life that Christ brings in his resurrection. Well, perhaps in infant baptism in the Church of England some of this imagery might be lost, but the grafting on to the vine of the Church, the Body of Christ, that emanates from the Tree of Life, is the same nonetheless. And just as the Sacrament of Baptism is the grafting into the vine, into the Body of Christ, the Church, so the Sacrament of Holy Communion is crucial to our abiding in Christ: in receiving the Body of Christ broken for us and restored to new and perfected life, so our broken and sinful selves are restored and perfected in Him when we come to Him in faith. Earlier in John’s Gospel we hear Jesus explain this Sacramental dependence explicitly: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

We hear many times in this Easter season the story of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, indeed we heard it last night at Evensong. I think it is no accident that the disciples ask the stranger who explains the events of Holy Week to them to stay with them even before they realise it is the resurrected Jesus. The Authorised Version has it ‘abide with us’. The disciples are a model for us in how we are to live through Christ, in how we might abide in him. Having heard the good news and accepted it, the explanation of scripture and of the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples offer hospitality. At table, in community, the disciples experience the Eucharistic presence, they recognise Jesus in the breaking of bread. Despite that this presence is fleeting and he disappears from their sight, they hurry back to the others, and tell the others of their transformative experience. They invited the risen Lord to abide in them.
Our own journeys of faith take many different shapes. But we are all invited to abide in Christ. This isn’t an individual struggle, a one-off decision, or an on/off switch. It really is a journey, and a journey that we are invited to make in community. In our baptism we have been grafted into the true vine that has its origin in the Tree of Life. We are bidden to abide in Christ in exploring what the Good News means for us, and for how we might live our lives, to walk with him in prayer. We are invited to recognise Jesus in the breaking of bread, to feed on him in Holy Communion, and to live lives that are Eucharistic – that bear out our living through him in all that we do. We are directed to plug that experience and journey back into the community of the faithful to water the vine, sharing the fruits of that abiding that we might encourage others, and share hospitality, welcome, and love with those who surround us. Abiding is transformative, for us, for those around us, for the Church, and for the world.

The floor of the Basilica of San Clemente is a beautiful cosmati pavement, whose intertwining lines lead towards the East end of the church, towards the Altar, and towards the Tree of Life depicted high above. They could almost be vines, leading us further up and further in, inviting us to abide in Christ.

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