It’s very good to be back with you all in Derby after my sabbatical adventures over the last three months. Part of that involved spending time in the medieval city of Assisi, as the locum chaplain to the small Anglican congregation. Assisi is full of interest; it’s also full of religious brothers and sisters who live there, and during the stay, I had the chance to get to know the Bose Community a little, a relatively new monastic order with several houses scattered across Italy.

At this particular one in Assisi, there are five brothers living together, who welcome visitors and pilgrims and maintain a sizeable plot of land with an olive grove and vineyard. They had not long finished the process of pruning the vines for the coming year’s new growth and on one of our visits were very keen for Teresa and me to sample the previous season’s vintage. Not wishing to disappoint them, we duly imbibed, and an enjoyable hour soon passed; from what I can remember of it, anyway! – I jest, of course, for it was Lent and some restraint was in order.

Clearly, the brothers had developed a very fruitful and productive relationship with their vineyard; but not just that. The time we shared with them showed that this relationship spilled over into generous hospitality, and a joy of simply being with those who came to share in their life. And that experience gives us a way into today’s Gospel.

Jesus describes himself as the true vine, and his Father as the vine-grower or dresser; there is an intimacy between the two of them; but it’s not an exclusive affair, for we are invited to be part of that divine dynamic, as the branches of the vine; to abide in it so that the life of the vine can abide in us.

Abide is not a word we use very often in our ordinary conversation, but it’s a big one in John’s Gospel, and woven through it. In fact, it crops up forty times in one form or another, continuing to feature in John’s letters too; it was there in our second reading – ‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’ – words that introduce the wedding liturgy.

John uses that word ‘Abide’, to graft together different threads; it binds the different persons of the Trinity together in a divine community; it links us to God in Christ, and it connects us with each other. It’s a powerful word concerned with relating and relationships, taking us into the territory of invitation and grace, of solidarity and commitment, of a sense of rootedness and belonging.

So, what then might ‘abiding’ look like in everyday practice as we seek to become who we are in Christ?

Well, I think to abide in Christ can take many forms. On one level, it involves giving time to prayer and Bible study. Some of you may be familiar with something called Lectio Divina, or Divine reading. It involves the practice of sitting with a short passage of Scripture; if you like, abiding with it, of giving real attention to it, & allowing it to address us. And there is something about prayer more generally, and indeed our worship that requires us to abide, to take time, to dwell in the company of God, that he may abide in us. It enables the gradual letting go of our own agendas and opens us up to that which is beyond ourselves, something deeper, but the concept of abiding in John’s Gospel doesn’t stop there. As we learn how to be branches grafted to the vine, we are inevitably connected with and to one another.

It’s tragically ironic that for all the sophisticated means of communication at our disposal and the opportunities they offer, our sense of isolation has actually increased. One of the constant themes that
emerges from my work at the University is that students experience increasing levels of loneliness. Extensive lists of contacts and myriad ‘friends’ via social media don’t seem to be able to meet the need, and in certain ways, simply exacerbate it.

I was very struck that during my time spent both in India and in Italy during which I had limited electronic communication with those around me, the smallest and simplest of face to face exchanges enabled relationships to slowly evolve; for, in a sense, we’d started the process of abiding with each other.

And it was a great sadness for me to be saying ‘goodbye’ to people just at the point at which we were beginning to know one another more fully. One particularly touching experience towards the end of my time in Assisi was an afternoon when I was walking through the streets, and on three separate occasions found myself meeting people I’d come across in the course of my role.

There was the opportunity to stop and share a brief word; brief because my Italian is fairly limited, but here I was, a stranger in a foreign city, experiencing, not isolation and loneliness, but a sense of belonging; it was, for me, an indication of an experience in which we come to know and be known by others, as brothers and sisters, connected within the context of a greater vine.

And finally, the image of the vine is, of course, a rich organic one, in which abiding involves a sense of connection to the earth. I think I’ve said on previous occasions that as a predominantly urban people, our connection with the land is, at best, disjointed, and at worst, fractured; the results of that are only too evident. Consequently, to abide in the vine is to learn or re-learn our relationship with the earth; from it we emerge and to it we return; it sustains our life and needs us to sustain its. Certainly, my time in Italy was an evocative reminder of that connection, with recently pruned vines much in evidence; a sobering one too, prompting the need to think about what requires a regular prune in my own life and its relationship to the earth.

Three examples, then, of abiding; with God, with each other, with creation, embodied in an image that shouts of relationship and rootedness. The language of abide, that permeates John’s writing, conveys a God who abides with us, and who calls us to abide with him, so that we can learn to abide with each other and the earth beneath our feet. Amen

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