

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 2nd May 2021
The fifth Sunday of Easter

Collect

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.
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.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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. 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.

John 15:1-8

'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.'

Sermon by Jason Gray

Well good morning Church and I hope you have all had a good week!

We continue our journey through Easter with this powerful and metaphoric reading from the Gospel of John that's full of imagery.

As I read it for the first time it reminded me of walking around Denbie's Estate in Dorking with Erica last year meandering through the rows and rows of grape vines that eventually get turned into thousands of bottles of wine.

Jesus, in verse 1 sets out the stall clearly. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes[a] to make it bear more fruit." "Abide in me as I abide in you."

There is a clear commitment from Jesus and a clear expectation of what it takes in order to be genuine disciples. What really drew my interest was this idea of the dual commitment.

There is the commitment from Jesus and it also requires the commitment of the individual.

Collectively it forms the basis for a healthy relationship and the ability for faith and life to grow.

It also sets out the stall for what will happen if the individual commitment can't or won't happen. The branch will wither and not generate growth or the ability to grow fruit.

Our lives are full of these moments that require these dual commitments and moments that see ourselves entering arrangements with the aim of fostering healthy, positive and loving outcomes for all concerned.

The win-win scenario requires commitment of both parties.

Those of you who have joined a gym or leisure centre will know that the centre can give you the commitment to run activities and access to various facilities to help you improve your health and fitness but without the commitment to routinely attend classes or use the facilities the ultimate dream of improved fitness and wellbeing is likely to never be achieved.

Paid employment is another area of life that requires the dual commitment from the employer and the employee. When we see the commitment from both parties it fosters a healthy and positive work experience leading to good and efficient outcomes for the organisation and personal professional growth and experience for the employee.

Of late I've been heavily involved in recruitment for various roles. Even in a Covid-19 world you would be surprised how much staff turnover happens and how difficult it can be to recruit the right people.

The dual commitment can be a tough ask and is not found easily.

I was recruiting for one role last month and we shortlisted and interviewed several candidates. Right towards the end of the process we were presented with a late application and a strong recommendation to find space to interview this candidate too. On meeting this candidate for two rounds of interviews it was evident that the dual commitment was there.

As an employer we were ready to commit, and this individual was perfectly qualified to do the role with enormous levels of motivation to commit to and work for our organisation.

I just know that decision to employ this individual will foster fantastic growth that will bear much fruit over the years to come.

Sadly, not all recruitment exercises end up with such positive and encouraging outcomes....

I had to recruit for another role in the last few weeks that didn't end up with the same outcome. We shortlisted and interviewed and there was one candidate that we put through two and half hours of interviews and testing over a couple of weeks', so we got to know this individual quite well!

This candidate was more than qualified to do the role, experienced and just the right fit to make it a real success. In the final question in the final interview I asked one that I rarely ask, and I said, "so xxxx if I offered you the role what would you say?"

The response I got was very sheepish, luke-warm and non-committal.

"Well Jason I've got another interview with another like-minded organisation in the morning so at the moment I really don't think I could commit to you!"

Our hearts sank as we really thought we had found the right candidate to successfully take on the role. I was in two minds whether to offer the candidate the role but in the end I did. The offer was subsequently rejected due to the candidate deciding to take the other role that was also offered to them. It's back to the drawing board....

I look back and think that even if they decided to take the role and join us I would probably be back in the same position in a year's time recruiting again due to that lack of dual commitment with the branch withering away and not being able to bear the fruit we wanted.

Abiding in each other can be tough and tenuous....

If I bring us back to the Gospel reading, the question I've got for you is where are you on this point of dual commitment with our God?

Are you in a good place to abide and commit in Him or is your branch withering a bit?

The Anglican Church has developed a new strategy to help us with our discipleship and help us all to foster strong branches on the vine that will bear fruit.

The vision is to be simpler, humbler and become bolder in our faith. We will hear more about this in the months to come.

If we challenge ourselves to live out our daily lives in this way we have every reason to believe that our relationship with God will grow, the vine will become ever stronger and bear more fruit in so many ways in our lives in love for those around us.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.