

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

28<sup>th</sup> April 2024 at St Mary's, Barnes

Acts 8.26-end; John 15.1-8

A vineyard is a lovely sight. All the vines, neatly pruned, laid out in rows facing the sky. Beautiful too is an individual vine, heavy with bunches of grapes ripening in the sun. In the Old Testament the people of Israel are often likened to a vineyard, with God as the vinedresser. In today's reading from John's Gospel, Jesus is depicted as a vine, with us Christians as the branches. 'I am the vine; you are the branches' says Jesus. It is made clear that through our baptism and faith we really are part of that vine and that we are to produce fruit. The essential condition is that we are to dwell in Christ and he is to dwell in us. Twice in the Gospel we heard the words 'Abide in me as I abide in you'. If we dwell or abide in him and he dwells or abides in us, we will bring forth great bunches of grapes.

We are used to thinking of our relationship to God in personal terms. It was said of Moses that he spoke to God face to face as a man speaks to a friend. But this relationship is not like any other. It is as the Gospel says as though we are branches on a vine with the sap of God flowing in us. It is both a dwelling in which live and at the same time we are a dwelling in which God lives. The relationship is not less than personal but it is certainly more than personal as the word is normally understood. That more indicates the closeness, the intimacy, the depth of what is held out for us.

People sometimes talk about life as a journey. But what kind of journey? A journey from where to where? It's a journey from life to death, yes, but not just that. It might be a journey towards self-fulfilment or happiness. That is desirable but it is not just that. It is above all a journey into the mystery and depth of God. T. S. Eliot wrote:

Old men ought to be explorers  
Here or there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion.

It is a paradoxical journey for it does not matter when we start or where we start from. Here or there does not matter. And it is a journey that can only be made if we are still-but it is a stillness in which we are moving into another intensity, for a further union, a deeper communion. This is the journey of life. This is the journey into God. This is the journey in which he abides in us and we in him.

This journey takes place in the circumstances of each day as it comes, in three simple ways. First, each day offers some good things, from the first light of the morning and the birds singing through the pleasures of meals and reading and talking. It is through these good things that the goodness of God comes to us. The poet Elizabeth Jennings put it so well.

I count the moments of my mercies up.

I make a list of love and find it full.

I do all this before I fall asleep.

Others examine consciences. I tell

My beads of gracious moments shining still.

I count my good hours and they guide me well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "I count the moments", NCP, p.138

It is through these good hours that the goodness of God reaches us and that communion is deepened.

Then in the circumstances of the day there are duties to be done. Duties are the will of God for us, and so to be grasped joyfully, not begrudgingly. Through embracing those duties as the will of God we again deepen that communion.

Then, occasionally there may be surprises, opportunities. We hear one such in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Philip felt a strange intuition, a touch of the Holy Spirit, that him to go along the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza-and that brings one up short today of course-there he met an official of the Queen of Ethiopia reading from the suffering servant passage in the prophet Isaiah. Philip explained to him that this had come to a fulfilment in Christ and the Ethiopian asked to be baptised. So it is that the church in Ethiopia is one of the oldest in the world.

As well as the good things of the day and the duties of the day, if we are open to the leading of the Spirit, there may be surprises, opportunities, ways to express love.

So, in these three way, the good things, the duties and the opportunities, the sap of Christs life flows in our life, and the grapes swell and ripen. So as the reading put it

If you dwell in me and my words dwell in you, ask whatever you want, and you shall have it. This is how my father is glorified: you are to bear fruit in plenty.

That asking what we want presupposes a mutual indwelling, so what we ask for will also be what Christ wants for us. It is this that bears fruit in the bunches of grapes.

For some people the circumstances in which they have to make their journey into God is very difficult. And perhaps for everyone at some point or another in their lives. So the lines from Eliot that I quoted about another intensity, a further union, a deeper communion, continue

Through the dark cold and empty desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

But whether it is in the good hours or the difficult times, it is the same journey into God.

In the old Book of Common Prayer there is what is called the Prayer of Humble Access. It is a prayer we sometimes use in this service. It is a prayer which ends by asking that we so take the life and love of Christ in us through the sacrament that we may ever dwell in him and he in us.

Life is a journey into the mystery and depth of God-into a further union, a deeper communion-into a mutual indwelling.

So to the Father who ever dwells in the Son and the Holy Spirit and who comes to dwell in us be all glory now and for evermore.