

ABIDING IN LOVE

Acts 10. 44-48

1 John 5. 1-6

John 15. 9-17

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Many years ago, a man came to speak at the Oxford Union. He was a musician with an extraordinary sense of humour, and he was passionate about the arts. He is little remembered now. His name was Gerard Hoffnung. In his speech, he gave advice to people visiting London from overseas. The good people of St Stephen's do not need advice about visiting London, but this bit of Hoffnung's advice they should certainly not follow today. Hoffnung told the members of the Oxford Union that upon entering a railway compartment, one should be sure to shake hands with all the passengers; and that once on the roadways in London, one should ignore all left and right signs, since these were merely political slogans.

Hoffnung also read out letters that his wife had received from Austrian landladies in response to her requests for accommodation in the Alps. One of them went like this: 'Dear Madam, I am honourable to accept your impossible request. Unhappy it is I here, have not bedroom with bath. A bathroom with bed I have. I can, though, give you a washing, with pleasure, in a most clean spring with no one to see'. Another letter said: 'I insist that you will like this...I can offer you a commodious chamber with balcony imminent to the romantic gorge, and I hope that you want to drop in. Sorrowfully, I cannot abide your auto.'

'I cannot abide your auto'. The word 'abide' is an Old English word, not, like so many words in our language, borrowed from French or Latin. An *abode* is a home, a place in which you *abide*. It was only with the advent of Middle English that the word

‘abide’ acquired a transitive use, meaning ‘to put up with’ or ‘tolerate’. This use was first recorded in the 1520s. In modern English, the word ‘abide’ is generally expressed in the negative when used transitively: I can’t abide mess; or this heat; or that piece of music; or that person.

In today’s gospel reading, we find the word ‘abide’ in its older, intransitive usage: ‘abide in’. ‘If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.’ Our Lord says to his disciples that our abode will be in his love, if we keep his commandments. Last Sunday, our gospel reading was from the first few verses of chapter fifteen of St John’s gospel; and here it seems clear that Jesus is saying that we can and will keep his commandment to love, if we are open to receiving the gift of love he offers us first. God’s love takes the initiative; our love for God and our love in God for one another are both part of one and the same response to God’s love for us. God’s love comes first. Our love is a response to his love. As John says in his first Epistle, ‘In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us’ (4. 10).

The word ‘abide’ figures prominently in today’s gospel reading: ‘you will abide in my love.’ Christ calls us to abide in him, to be at home with him and to make our home in him. He promises that we can truly live in him.

The word ‘abide’ also appears in one of the most powerful and evocative accounts in the New Testament, the story of the road to Emmaus, in St Luke’s gospel. You know the story. On the very day of our Lord’s Resurrection, in the evening, two of his disciples, despairing of their Master, thinking him dead and buried and soon to be forgotten, are travelling away from the city as fast as they can and walk the road to Emmaus. The risen Jesus joins them, but something prevents them from recognising him. He asks them what troubles them and opens to them the Old Testament prophecies about himself. It was intended that the Son of Man would suffer and die, but on the third day rise again. They reach Emmaus, where the two

disciples plan to stay for the night; but Christ makes to go on. They say to him, ‘Abide (or stay) with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over’ (Luke 24. 29). Our Lord stays, and having opened the scriptures to them on the journey, now he breaks bread with them; and their eyes are opened and they recognise him. ‘Were not our hearts burning within us?’ they say as they return to Jerusalem with the glad news. Abide with us. The disciples, full of the word of truth in the scriptures, invite Jesus to abide with them; they ask him to make his home *with them* and *in them*; and Christ agrees.

In the passage from St John’s gospel, we have seen that a *Christian’s home is in our Lord*; and that we *can abide in him*. And now through the passage from St Luke’s gospel, we also see that Jesus can and will make *his home in us*.

These same two ideas inform the wonderful Prayer of Humble Access, which was written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury in the late 1540s. This prayer is a familiar and powerful part of our Anglican liturgy for the Service of Holy Communion. As we prepare to receive the bread and wine, which through consecration have become for us the very Body and Blood of our Lord, we pray that ‘our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body and our souls washed through his most precious Blood, and that we may evermore *dwell in him and he in us*.’

The high point is, of course, the moment at which we receive the bread and wine which are the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist is richly powerful, both symbolically and in its interpretation. One of the most potent images for me is that, in the Blessed Sacrament, we receive a little insight into the ways of heaven. Here we receive a foretaste, or a promise of what is to come; and one day we shall enjoy the heavenly banquet to the full.

This side of heaven, we all yearn to dwell in Christ; and we all yearn for him to dwell in us. The Eucharist is one of the means that God gives us to ‘abide’ in our Lord; yet it is not the only one. You and I also dwell in him thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are united with Jesus; we can rely on Jesus; and we can remain in Jesus and experience his love for us. And in like fashion, he is united with us and remains in us.

At the top of the hill that leads out from St Peter Port, the mission of St Stephen’s Church, in its serenity and certainty, is to say to the people of Guernsey and to all who will listen: here we have no abiding city; here we have no true home. Our homeland is in heaven. Our home is in Jesus; and his home is in us.

Yes, it is true that we must abide here on earth for a while; but the true glory will come afterwards, when we shall fully *abide in Christ, and he in us*. Then we shall understand the full significance of the words, ‘I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!’ (Psalm 122. 1); because that truth will have become our eternal reality.

Amen.