

This week I have been in the Garden of England. I am actually not sure where it was, I know it was near Bodiam castle and all the signs were saying 20 kms to Hastings. I know I was in the garden of England for 3 reasons: one ever sign on the motorway said welcome to the garden; the surrounding of where were staying were the most amazing gardens I think I have ever seen at a retreat centre; and the fruit and veg were delicious!

The reason I was in this mysterious part of Kent was to assist in leading a retreat for 2<sup>nd</sup> year curates. Priests who are coming to the end of the training cycle and will be soon looking to apply for their first job as a Vicar or Rector or Chaplain. As you might imagine on such a retreat I had a number of conversations with people about where they are, and how they know where they are going next – and how they discern what God is asking of them for the next part of their journey. For me it felt poignant that we were asking such questions in a strange environment, and actually for many of us in a location which we couldn't place.

It has led me to think about how is it that we know where we are? Do people tell us? Do we know because of the signage? Do we understand by the things around us that we can place? Often it is a combination of all of these which help us to understand. Sadly for some people, these are not enough – sometimes because of illness or cognitive ability we never have an understanding the place we are in. I have been visiting an elderly woman for some time who is a nursing home who believes she is living in Ruislip because she can see a field which reminds her of a place her husband used to play cricket. The nursing home is not even close to Ruislip it is in another part of London, but for her the visual cues remind her of another place, and that was a place of happiness. I suspect it doesn't really matter if she thinks it Ruislip, but rather that she feels safe where she is.

I suspect there are times in all our lives when we enter a new place and it reminds us of another. I have even had the experience of a smell in London reminding me of something in Australia and having to concentrate hard to remind myself that I am not there.

Knowing where we are however so often helps us to know who we are, and whose we are.

Our readings set for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter focus on how we know that we are part of this Resurrection community. A community of Christians who know that they love God and are loved by God.

One of the key phrases in our readings we heard in our Gospel '*As I abide in you*'. It is too easy at times to hear the reading of the pruning of branches as a threat on Jesus behalf to those who won't believe. But if we look at the whole context of the passage this is not the case. Jesus doesn't just say "Abide in me." Rather, he says, "Abide in

me, as I abide in you.” And that changes everything. The other statements about pruning and withering and the rest are not threats of intimidation but rather statements of fact, descriptions of what happens when we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from his love and acceptance, or when we run or hide or think we can do it on our own or decide to stand alone or whatever. Branches don’t do that well when separated from the vine. At best they, like cut flowers, have a burst of colour and bloom but then fade and wither.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons we know this is because of where the passage is set. In this part of John’s Gospel, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure, he is trying to help them understand how they will know where they are when he is gone. Now we read this passage with this knowledge – but of course Jesus disciples do not know what is going to happen next, and so for them these are very difficult things to hear; in a place they didn’t understand

Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples that they will not be left alone. If we remember back to last week, we talked about the fact that John’s Gospel is written for a community in exile and who were having a really difficult time. A community who did not have good models of leadership<sup>2</sup>. John writes to help his community make sense of the world in which they live; to make sense not just of the hardship, but also of the hope and promise which Jesus offers- to make sense of where they are now.

Historically, the community for which John writes has likely been thrown out, rejected by friends and family, and feels pretty alone and orphaned. They are, quite literally, feeling like they are being cut down. And John, through his retelling of Jesus’ words of farewell and comfort, is offering a different frame of reference by which to reinterpret their experience. It’s not being cut down, but pruned. At the same time, John is making a promise: Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go. Important words for people who feel cut down by circumstances<sup>3</sup>.

As with last week in the letter which John writes later the promise of the Easter message is that we are people who are known and loved by God; and that God’s gift to us is abundant love. It all begins with God’s love. In case we ever forget this basic, essential fact of our faith, 1 John makes it crystal clear. God is the source and the definition of love. God is love. God loves as the sun shines: love expresses who God is. 1 John emphasizes that God’s love is not some abstract concept. It is passion expressed in action.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/04/easter-5-b-as-i-abide-in-you/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3628](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3628)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/04/easter-5-b-as-i-abide-in-you/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2448](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2448)

In this sense we know where we are, and who we are by the abundance of love. Equally when we feel pruned or cut off we can seek out this love, be nurtured by this love when we feel bruised or challenge by what is going on around us.

I spent time on Friday and Saturday speaking with two families who are preparing for funerals in the coming weeks. In one meeting the loss and grief was strong – the love that was felt and lost was strong and painful. In the other for conversation the love was hard to identify, there were unspoken conflict which had lasted until death, unchallenged behaviour – and grief was difficult because they person had been hard to love.

Knowing each other, knowing ourselves, knowing where we are – either in reality or conceptually so often comes down to how we are nurtured in love, and not cut off from the source of love or reality. The use of the two phrases for love in John’s letter is significant because love is also about naming, it is about honesty, it is about openness. The death and resurrection of Christ is an act of love because of the bridge it builds, but also because of the truth it proclaims.

A friend send me a link yesterday of a very cheesy blue grass song – the chorus of which was ‘you can’t love God if you don’t love your neighbour<sup>5</sup>’. While a bizarre song in many ways it was a good reminder – ultimately love is seen and experienced in the way we treat each other.

The whole foundation of 1 John’s argument suggests if we love others as God has loved us, there can be no boundaries to the effectiveness of love in the quest for justice. God’s love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. If Jesus shows us what God’s love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being – and it is in this love that we abide! In a week when yet again we are called to vote – maybe we can allow this understand of love to help us discern who will help us bring about this justice. This helps us to know who we are, and whose we are.

It is love that we are called to reflect this week. We are God’s family, connected to one another, called to live each day as an ambassador of God, engaging with our neighbours, hearing the stories of our friends, fulfilling our responsibilities as a community – like remembering to vote. John reminds us “Abide in me, as I abide in you.” For this is the heart of the source of love, justice and grace. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR2rpVd5Lwo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR2rpVd5Lwo)