

Easter 5

John 15.1-8

Two disciples reach the village with their mysterious companion who has joined them along the way. It was getting late. 'Stay with us,' they said, 'because it is almost evening'. These were the words turned into a hymn by Henry Francis Lyte, 'Abide with me, fast falls the eventide'. The word for 'stay' or 'abide' is 'meno', from which we get, via the Latin, 'remain'. It is a favourite word in John's gospel where it is sometimes translated 'remain'; sometimes 'stay' and sometimes as in today's gospel reading, 'abide'. At the beginning of the gospel two other disciples draw alongside Jesus and ask him 'where are you staying', 'maining'. He said to them, "Come and see". 'They came and saw where he was staying (maining)', it says, 'and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.' – in other words, almost evening. Modern scholarship suggests that John had the three gospels if not in front of him literally, then in the front of his mind, and he seems deliberately not to repeat what he and we already know, but to shed a different light on things, to see and help us to see certain patterns and themes in the story and the significance of Jesus that we might otherwise have missed. So it is quite possible that he places this first book end at the beginning of his gospel as a mirror image of the one Luke places at the end of his. In one two disciples draw alongside Jesus and accept an invitation to where he is staying; in the other, Jesus draws alongside two disciples and accepts an invitation to stay with them. And 'stay' is a good translation for this – a host is extending hospitality, offering a home, a bed for the night and a place at the table. Jesus invites his disciples to share a meal and to be part of the family, as it were, giving a place to stay, to remain, to abide. And then in turn his disciples follow his example, they have learnt how to do it: they invite their unrecognised guest to their table, their hearth and their home (as we might say). And in doing so their eyes are opened and they realise that they have welcomed Jesus into their midst. The one who was the host has become the guest.

John's gospel continued with a series of seven signs. He doesn't call them miracles (although they are pretty miraculous); he calls them signs because more important to John is not what happened but the what is their meaning, what they signify. So in the first of these Jesus transforms water that was set aside for the rites of purification into wine that crowns a wedding celebrations and brings joy and gladness, the wine of the kingdom the Jesus is ushering in.

As well as seven signs there are seven 'I am' sayings, unique to John's gospel. I am the light of the world,,, the door of the sheep... the good shepherd... the resurrection and the life... the way, the truth and the life. The last one is 'I am the true vine', today's gospel, which links back not only to the first sign, the wine, but also to the first 'I am' saying – 'I am the bread of life' in John 6, the most extended of the 'I am' discourses, which is given in the context of the sign of the five loaves and two fish, the feeding of the five thousand. Here too is the language of abiding, maining: 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.' It's as though John has transferred his teaching about the Last Supper from the upper room to the remote region near the Sea of Galilee, as though this new meal, this central act of Christian hospitality, was instituted long in advance of the night before he died. Indeed John devotes five whole chapters to the upper room, to that night, but there is no mention of the Last Supper at all and neither bread nor wine. This has puzzled many readers and commentators down the centuries, but the key to it may be that here we have another two bookends: the bread of life, the first 'I am' at one end (together with the wine of the first sign) and the last of the 'I am' sayings at the other – 'I am the true vine'. What matters is not just drinking a sip of wine; what matters is what it signifies, where it comes from and that is Christ himself, the vine that pours its life into the fruit, so that those who taste the fruit, through drinking its wine are tasting what has been given life by the vine which bore it. 'Abide in me' says Jesus. Come and stay, have a meal, not a dash in for some fast food, but a proper meal, hospitality, family, friendship, belonging, somewhere to call home – come and stay. We are the branches; the church can only exist when enough people accept the invitation to come and stay, to abide, and that has to be more than a quick popping in on a Sunday morning. You can't be family on an hour a week. This hour is

the highlight of the week for most of the family, when most of the family come together – old-fashioned Sunday lunch, if you like. We need it, both because we need to be fed at this table - this satisfies our hunger and thirst – but also because we need one another, it is only when we are together that we can experience the fullness of Christ’s presence with us. But there are other ways, really important ways, that our family of faith is sustained and nurtured – coffee mornings, house groups, working parties for tidying the church and churchyard, making music, arranging flowers, praying together, studying together, even being on the church council. And I want to say thank you for being there, for populating this place, this community, and all we do together – for turning out in big numbers for our festivals and packing out the place – and for the smaller numbers who come to the more niche services like the Easter Vigil and the Passion Service and the Advent Service – I really love them and thank you for those who come and make sure I’m not on my own. All of this being there and belonging helps us to abide in Christ and to be connected with that life-giving organic thing that is both him and all those who belong to him. And that to me is the extraordinary thing. When he says that he is the vine and we are the branches, he’s talking about the same thing. The branches are the vine; the vine only exists through its branches. And so we have this amazing switching and interpenetrating of roles between us and Christ. ‘Abide in my as I abide in you.’ Who is being the host and who the guest? It seems to be swapping round all the time. Is it Jesus inviting his disciples to come and stay as at the beginning or the disciples inviting Jesus as at the end? Or is it both? ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.’

Jean Vanier writes this:

*To abide or dwell in Jesus is to make our home in him
and to let Jesus make his home in us.
It is a place of rest for one another and presence to one another.
It is a place of mutual indwelling and friendship.
This rest is also a source of life and creativity.
Abiding in him, we bear fruit, we give life to others.
We live in mutual indwelling.
This indwelling is friendship.*