

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8.26—40

1 John 4.7-21

John 15.1—8

The writings of John, both in the Gospel and the epistles, are bafflingly determined not to come down on one side or the other of ‘chicken or egg’ question. Which comes first, love of God or love of our neighbour? Which is more important, being or doing? Are we saved by grace or by works? Instinctively, temperamentally, most people come down on one side or another, and hear only those parts of the good news of Jesus Christ that seem to reinforce what is natural to us. Some people instinctively hear the message contained in Jesus’s first public statement in Luke’s Gospel: ‘good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed’ (Luke 4.18—19). Surely this is the heart of Jesus’s message, they argue, and Christian witness to Christ is most faithful when it is actively doing things to improve life for society. Other people instinctively see that all of Jesus’s activity arises out of his times of silence and prayer. His ministry starts not as he stands up and speaks, but as he wrestles alone in the desert.

The problem is that today’s Gospel and epistle, like most of the New Testament, do not let you see that as an either/or. Instead, they argue, it is always both. Both epistle and Gospel are talking about the nature of God, which we contemplate with awe, but which we are also drawn into. 1 John talks about love as the fundamental nature and sign of God. Where you see love, you know the presence of God. Out of love, God the Son comes to die, so that we can be drawn back into the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In God, then, love is not an abstract quality, but one that we experience very directly as activity. God acts lovingly towards us, and that is how we know that he is indeed love. In God, being and doing are not separate — he is love and acts lovingly. For us, that is not always the case because, unlike God, we are not yet complete

The people to whom 1 John is addressed are presumably people who have accepted the saving love of God with gratitude, but who are still able to act without love to one another because in them, as in us, love has a beginning and a finite end. The great aim of our life is to make the beginning and the end of love get further and further apart in us, so that there is more and more room, more and more things we can love. In God love has no beginning and no end. As the great seventeenth-century poet John Donne said in one of his Christmas sermons, God’s love is like a circle — endless.

The Gospel is talking about another one of God’s inalienable characteristics, which is life. 1 John’s language about love can sound a bit repetitive and soft-edged, despite the urgency of what is being said, but if you put it alongside today’s Gospel, the reason for

the urgency becomes clearer. God is the only source of life. If you pick flowers, they die. If you take people away from God, they die. It is not that this is a punishment, exactly; it is more that it is just a fact of life. So only branches grafted into the true vine can live and bear fruit. That is why this choice between being and doing is a false one. You are either alive with the life of God, the life in which there is no distinction between what God is and what he does, or you are not alive at all.

Many of us would quite like to rely on the life-giving love of God for ourselves without having to change too much. Philip, in today's story from Acts, wouldn't understand the question 'Should I spend time in prayer or should I go out and preach?' He has allowed himself to be very directly grafted into the life of God, so that everyone he meets is an opportunity waiting to be shown the love of God. An Ethiopian eunuch, miles from home, reading the Bible? When did you last expect to find someone like that waiting for you? Most of us wouldn't know such an opportunity if it passed us by, not even in a golden carriage full of treasure, and so we miss the chance that Philip seized to work with God. And on his way home, 'as he happened to be passing through the region' of Azotus, he preached there too. 'What, travel through a whole region without showing people the love of God?' Philip asks. 'Are you mad?'

*Jane Williams
from Lectionary Reflections*

Prayer

Almighty God,
who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us
 you put into our minds good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect;
through Jesus Christ our risen Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen