

Sermon on John 15:9-17 for 17 May 10:30 Robert Innes

I am sure you will have known someone like this. I call them starter-abandonners. They are full of good ideas. They burst in with their next suggestion of something we could all do. Yes it may be complicated; it will involve lots of people and meetings to do this and that, yes there will be money involved...but...you have to understand it's a great idea. So maybe reluctantly and with misgivings you get involved. Things start happening, people are contacted, expectations are raised. And then, a few weeks later it all collapses. The person themselves has got disillusioned and lost interest. Unforeseen obstacles arose. They discovered there were more urgent things for them to do. It was all more difficult than they expected. It all collapses. And you are left helping to pick up the pieces. Until, the next great idea comes along. What havoc is wreaked by the 'starter-abandonner'!

By contrast you may be lucky enough to know someone who is a completer-finisher. This is the person who never rests until the job is complete. When everyone else has simply got up and left after the party, this is the person who stays around to stack the chairs and sweep the floor. The completer-finisher makes sure that every page is properly copied and every number is correct. This is the person who when they are planning a big event makes one last phone call to make sure that the key people really are coming. She is the lady who always insists on asking at every meeting, 'but who is going to do it?' Blessed indeed is the workgroup, the team or the church that has a 'completer-finisher'.

Our Bible reading today commends those who, who abide, who hold steadfast, who complete that to which they have committed. "As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Now remain in my love." The little Greek word is *meno*. It is one of St. John's favourite words. It occurs several times at the beginning of today's gospel reading from John 15: "now *remain* in my love; if you obey my commands you will *remain* in my love" and it occurs at the end in verse 16: "go and bear fruit, fruit that will last". We could call it staying power. The Christian life is not for sprinters: those who dash for 100 metres and then collapse exhausted, but for long distance runners: those who endure to the end. Today, then, a sermon on just one phrase: "abide in my love". And three questions: why is this spiritual principle so important, how do we do it, and what happens as a result.

To begin with, John keeps repeating throughout his gospel the importance of abiding or remaining in Jesus's love. Why does he do this? First of all, because God is a God who abides, who remains, who stays steadfast. As Isaiah says: "the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever." God was there long before us, he will be there long after we have gone, and his promises to us endure for ever. What is more, the love between the Father and the Son also endures for ever. As Jesus says: "I have obeyed my Father's commands and I remain in his love." The Father and the Son live in a relationship of faithful love from eternity. At the heart of everything is a relationship that endures for ever. Nothing could be a stronger role model for human relationships than that.

And what John tells us in this passage is that the relationship between the Father and the Son has been opened up to include human beings like you and me too. Here we are into very deep spiritual material. The love between the Father and the Son has

been stretched as far as possible by the death of the Son. Acting in obedience to the Father's command, the Son has freely chosen to die for those who were once merely his servants, but have now become his friends. And so Jesus invites us share in the deep love which is at the heart of the universe, to abide in his love, just as he abides in the Father's love. "Abiding in the love of Jesus" is a vital spiritual principle because it takes us into the deepest spiritual mystery there is; it incorporates us into the very life of God. To know Jesus love is to be caught up in the love between the Father and the Son, to be taken into the life of God himself.

Well this might sound rather lofty stuff. So secondly, how do we do it? How might we, in practice, abide in Jesus. John's response is surprisingly practical. He says there is just one condition: "you will remain in my love if you keep my commandments, and my command is this: love each another." It's not a matter of individual mystical experience, it is about belonging to a community. Love for St. John is a verb. It isn't a state of mind or an emotion. It is about doing things. God has established the church as the community in which his love is to be known and experienced. It is to be this particular community, above all others, where the love that exists for ever between the Father and the Son is to be replicated, experienced and practised.

To become a Christian is a bit like being adopted into a family. Very few children choose their adoptive family; it is chosen for them. Our family – natural or adoptive – may have its good points and its bad points, but it is the one we've been placed in. It's the place where we learn to give and take, it gives us security and belonging, and it shapes our growth. Over the course of the years our position in the family changes, we start off as children, become adults, maybe parents, then grandparents, senior members, but this family is our family and it's ours for ever. And it's the place, or ought to be the place, where we give and receive love.

What is asked of us by Jesus is simply that we 'remain' that we 'stay'. We are to practice in our Christian community that kind of long-term faithful love that exists between the Father and the Son. It is easy and tempting in the Christian life to be a starter-abandonner. To have a go at one community and give it up, to try somewhere else and give that up, and then maybe to have a loose attachment to several communities but really belonging to none of them. But because the church is fundamentally a set of loving relationships rather than a provider of religious services, the church doesn't work properly if people drift in and out of relationships. And because love is a verb, it means doing what we promise, honouring our commitments, caring about other people. This is my command, says Jesus: "Love each other".

When I started training for ordained ministry at the age of 30, I had lots of misconceptions about the church that I had to unlearn. All my working life to that point had been in industry and commerce. And so I naturally saw the church as a business, in fact a rather third rate business. I couldn't believe how long it took for churches to change. I was amazed that small inefficient churches didn't just close and merge into big efficient ones. Fortunately, I learnt my lessons before being released from college into the ministerial life. Of course, churches do have their business aspects. I thank God daily for our treasurer, our finance committee, our administrative council. But fundamentally we are a family. We are a community of love. And if anything gets done around here it isn't because we have a product to sell or money to make but because we love and care for one another and for the God in whose image

we are made. Abiding in the love of Jesus then, is something we will do if we obey his command, which is the simple command, ‘love one another’.

Thirdly and finally, what is the result of abiding in Jesus. It is, says St. John, that you will go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. In February we planted some fruit trees in our garden, an apple tree, a pear tree, and a plum tree. They have survived the frosts, in April they blossomed, and they are now in leaf. But we don’t at all expect that they will produce any fruit in the summer. It will be a year or two or longer before any fruit appears on their branches. Fruit production is a long term business.

In the New Testament, spiritual fruit refers especially to character attributes: “love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control”: these Paul tells us are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And character, like a good wine or a good cheese, takes time to mature.

Our passage from St. John suggests a very relational way of living. In 2009 we all and younger people in particular live in networks. Email, mobile phones, facebook: *stay connected* is the watchword. But this kind of continual connectedness can sometimes be exhausting and sometimes superficial. What St. John offers is a *deep* connectedness with God and with others. This is about long-term relationships with God and a serious and determined effort to give and receive love in the Christian community. That’s quite counter-cultural and for many of us does not come naturally. But it is very good for us. Because it is when we am most deeply aware of God that we are most deeply in touch with our selves. And it is often in the shared experiences of worshipping or serving with others that I both feel most truly part of a community and feel most truly at home with myself.

We are constantly relating to and being influenced by others. Today’s electronic networks make that more true than ever. But we have a choice as to how we are networked and with whom. St. John encourages us to abide in Jesus, because by doing that we will open ourselves to a powerful, divine love, which is affirming, caring and positively transforming. “Abide in me”, he says, “and you will bear fruit that will last”.

So, to conclude, when it comes to the spiritual life, are you, am I a ‘started abandonner’ or a ‘completer finisher’? We worship a God who makes himself known as Trinity of loving relationships that abide for ever. God gives us in his own being a model of enduring, faithful love. More than that in the death of his Son, he extends and opens this relationship of love to us created human beings, whom he no longer calls servants but friends. This love is given on one condition, that we love each other – not that we have warm feelings to one another, but that we practically do things which help each other. And the result of living in this way is lives that bear the lovely fruit of an attractive and beautiful character.

The Christian life is not a project for the short term. It isn’t about sudden bursts of enthusiasm. It is about the long and slow process whereby we are made new. Faithfulness, constancy, commitment, abiding in Jesus. These are the values which St. John commends for the successful spiritual life. So we hear Jesus words as both a challenge and a promise. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love.” Amen.