Homily – 5th Sunday of Easter (B)

*Acts 9: 26-31; 1 Jn. 3: 18-24 & Jn. 15: 1-8*

I was talking recently with a young Catholic man, one of a number I see regularly as part of my work as Vocations Co-ordinator for the Abbey. We were discussing the “experience” of being at Mass, when he said something very touching. “I love Mass”, he said, “it is as if time suddenly stopped – as if really nothing else in the world mattered, as if there was nothing coming next”. I was very struck by those comments. It may not be everyone’s experience of Mass – indeed I can imagine that every one of us here this morning has sometimes felt they couldn’t wait for Mass to be finished – but it did strike a chord with me.

That idea of “timelessness”, of the “suspension” of our normal experience of Time’s progress seems singularly appropriate during Eastertide. We celebrate the Octave days of Easter as if they were one day – with almost every element of the liturgy identical. Even the run of 50 days between Easter and Pentecost has a “singular” identity – something picked up at the beginning of all the Easter Prefaces: *but at this time above all, to laud you yet more gloriously when Christ our Passover has been sacrificed*. And I think a major contributing factor to that sense of “timelessness” is the fact that we read from St John’s gospel throughout the season of Easter. There are two ways in which John’s gospel seems to “dislocate” our usual sense of time. As you will be well aware I’m sure, John’s gospel is much less “story-led” than the Synoptics; there is, of course, a narrative, a story, but the Jesus of John’s gospel teaches more in long discourses, long speeches, than he does in short sayings or parables. Those long “discourses” – including today’s gospel passage – can offer some challenges for the preacher, for they can all sound rather similar, they seem to go round in circles, toying poetically with a few well-chosen images rather than laying out an argument, rather than coming to a conclusion. And I think that very “circularity” of the discourses gives them a timeless quality – they are in no rush to get anywhere.

The second aspect, I think, of Johannine “timelessness” is that Jesus’ discourses are, in some sense, “free-standing” – they don’t seem to tie very closely with their context in the narrative. I think one example shows this very clearly. Many couples choose next Sunday’s gospel – Jesus’ teaching on love – as the gospel for their weddings, and rightly so; it is very fitting and very beautiful. And yet those words were spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper, just moments after Judas had left the table to betray him, just moments before he will be arrested in Gethsemane. At the time when most of us would feel threatened and afraid, Jesus – even knowing what was to come – speaks of love for his friends. This “free-standing” even almost “free-floating” nature of Jesus’ words makes them “timeless” – to be pondered upon at any time and season. Perhaps that is why it is so easy for us to hear those words of Jesus – spoken before his Passion – as if they were said on Easter day, to hear them, as it were, with “Easter ears”.

In today’s gospel, Jesus chooses the image of the true vine as the basis of his discourse. In one sense, this is a highly traditional image. Throughout the OT, the vine is a symbol of Israel, the chosen people of God, the vine is the people he has planted and protected. Sometimes, as in Ezekiel, that vine bears bitter grapes and earns God’s wrath. Elsewhere, as in the psalms, it is threatened by the wild animals who seek to uproot it, and begs for God’s protection. And that image, of course, appears in Jesus’ own parables – especially the parable of the wicked tenants, which is a fierce critique of Israel’s response to the preaching of both the prophets and of Jesus himself.

Yet in today’s gospel, the image takes on a new and unusual meaning. I had never really noticed before trying to write this homily that the majority of the great “I am” sayings of Jesus, which form the basis of so many of the discourses, belong to two groups. Some are concrete but “external” images – I am the light of the world; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the bread of life and so on. Others are more “abstract” – I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; I am the Resurrection and the Life. All are ways in which Jesus describes himself as “gift” – offering himself from “outside”, as it were, to those who follow him. But today’s image is different. Jesus says “I am the vine, you are the branches” – it is a “unitive” image, for Master and disciples are one plant in the Father’s hands as vinedresser. Jesus says “I am the vine, you *are* the branches” – not ‘you will one day be a branch’ or ‘you must work to become a branch’ – the plant is *already* established, the life with Christ *already* shared. It seems less a question of what we are – branches of the vine – than what we are to become. Are we to bear fruit or not?

And in a sense, there is a one word answer to that question – and that word is “remain”. That verb occurs again and again and again in these chapters of John and the gospels we will hear. Perhaps, in these dark days when the words “remain” and “leave” have become such shibboleths, it might be kinder to use the older translation – “abide”. And in some senses, it is a better word anyway, with its strong sense of “in-dwelling”. If we make Christ our home, and if we make space for him to dwell in us, then we will bear fruit. If we let Christ make a home within us, and find in him our dwelling, then the fruit we bear will give glory to the Father. And in a sense, it brings us back to where we started – to “timelessness”. It brings us back to the prayer of the disciples walking to Emmaus on that first Easter day – *“Stay with us, O Lord, for the night is close at hand”* – a prayer which the Church echoes each day in the Easter liturgy. It takes us deep into the timeless indwelling of the Trinity – each Person abiding in and with each other in their endless dance of love. If we make Christ our home, and let him truly dwell with us, then the words of that young man about his experience of the Mass become true – nothing else really matters, there is nothing more to come – there is just that eternal life whose first fruits we already taste, here and now, at this altar.

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28.4.16

Bidding Prayers: 5th Sun. of Easter (B)

Intro: Fr Oswald

R: Let us pray for Pope Francis, for Bernard our Bishop and for all those with a ministry of service in the Church:

May they preach the word of God with boldness, so that it may find a home in all believers, and that – always remaining in Christ the true vine – we may bear fruit to the glory of God.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for the Yr.10 girls from Downe House School who were with us on retreat last week, and who will be confirmed this evening:

May the Holy Spirit give them wisdom and courage in their search to fulfil God’s will, and pour out on them his gifts of fortitude, patience and love.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all here at St Benet’s:

Let us ask God’s blessing on the Master and Betty, on our tutors and fellows, on our students, on our staff who serve here, and on all who join us here for prayer.

We pray especially at this time for those preparing for Final examinations.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray for all those in need:

We pray for the poor and the homeless, for refugees and all those driven from home by economic circumstances or conflict, for the sick in mind or in body, and for the dying.

May we always be generous in seeking to bring what help we can.

Lord, in your mercy...

Let us ask Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, to join her prayers to ours as we say: ***Hail Mary...***

Concluding Prayer: Fr O