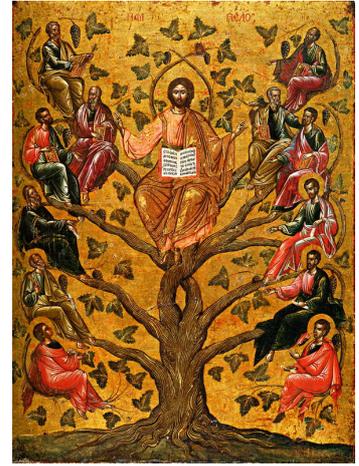


Fifth Sunday of Easter

"I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-grower...Live on in me, as I do in you. No more than a branch can bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, can you bear fruit apart from me. I am the vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated from me, you can't produce anything."



The renowned Romantic, English poet and social reformer, William Blake was the author of the poem *Jerusalem*, which many describe as the unofficial English national anthem. Set to music, it featured in the film *Chariots of Fire* and is sung annually at the famous British Prom Concerts in the Royal Albert Hall in London. The poem is based on an English legend that Jesus, as a young man, visited the shores of England (formerly called Albion). The opening verse of *Jerusalem* refers to that legend:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green,
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

Blake was a deeply religious man and wrote a much longer poem, also entitled *Jerusalem* (some 100 pages of verse and illustrations). The opening lines of this long poem echo today's gospel-reading:

*Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage through
Eternal Death! and of wakening to Eternal Life.
This theme calls me in sleep night after night, & ev'ry morn
Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the Saviour over me
Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words of this mild song.
Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!
I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:
Fibres of love from man to man thro' Albion's pleasant land.*
(Note: *Ulro* is an Anglo-Saxon word for the land of the living dead or hell.)

In yet another of his poems, *The Little Black Boy*, Blake describes what a young African lad learned about God from his mother. He attributes the following, profound words to the boy:

*And we are put on earth, a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.*

Today's reflection is not meant to be a lesson in the poetry of William Blake, but it is about the reminder which Jesus gave his disciples on the night before he died. - a reminder that in Jesus' love for us and for all humanity we are grafted not only to him but to one another in ways that we probably don't fully understand, and that, arguably, the central purpose of our lives is to "learn to bear the beams of love".

The predominant theme running through today's gospel-reading is that of love - God's love for Jesus shared by him with all of humanity. If there is one thing that none of us has to be taught is that we are made for love. We know that because we have all felt love welling up from the very depths of our being. What we have learned from others, especially from our parents and from looking at the life of Jesus (love incarnate, loved enfleshed), is how to go about expressing our love in the best possible way.

To get grips on today's gospel-reading, it is probably worth our while to give some attention to the context out of which it grew. We know that all four evangelists wrote their Gospels to instruct and encourage the communities to which they belonged. Their focus was not on providing a biography of Jesus or on giving an account of the day-to-day activities of his public ministry. Rather, they were offering stories and explanations as to who Jesus was and how his followers might go about embracing and living the message of love which he lived and proclaimed. John's way of doing this was to employ language that relied heavily on symbols and metaphors. The key to understanding John is in discovering the significance of the imagery he used and coming to appreciate that he attributed that imagery to Jesus. We also have to acknowledge that Jesus probably used metaphors and symbols with which his various audiences would have been familiar.

In this context, it is worth noting that the culture and civilisation from which Abraham emerged was that of Sumeria. The nation of Sumeria was made up of city states which formed an alliance with one another for the sake of protection against invaders. These city states were located on the fertile plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (now Southern Iraq) and the culture and civilisation they developed were the seeds of what we now understand as culture and civilisation. Grapes have been cultivated in the Near and Middle East for thousands of years, and archaeologists have discovered the remains of a winery in Armenia that dates back 4000 years. In Sumerian culture, the symbol for life was the grape leaf. So, when Jesus used the symbol of the grapevine to describe himself, his listeners would have understood what he was talking about.

Today's gospel-reading from Chapter 15 of John is an extract from the discourse that John attributed to Jesus at the Lord's Supper on the evening before Jesus died. Moreover, it forms a key part of John's unfolding explanation of Eucharist. It goes all the way back to his account of the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6. Immediately after that event, John has Jesus declare: "I am the bread of life" (John 6, 28-59) - the very first of those seven "I am" statements special to John's Gospel, and referred to in last week's reflection. And Jesus proceeds to say: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide* in me and I in them". Now, in our gospel-reading today from chapter 15, we hear Jesus declaring: "I am the true vine...those who *abide* in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, *abide* in my love" (John 15, 1-8).

And let's not forget that the "you" in these passages refers to the eleven disciples and to us. It is in the plural, so we don't slip into thinking that Jesus is talking about some cosy, individualistic, personal relationship between himself and me. He is talking to a group of disciples as a community. John is using this part of his Gospel to address the community that he was leading, a community of believers that would grow into the early Church. In John's theology, the Word of God became enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, and will continue to become enfleshed in our world through us who gather as a community of believers around the person of Jesus in the meal we now call Eucharist. The abundance of love and life that flowed from God into Jesus continues to flow from Jesus Christ into us as we gather round him, participating in the Eucharistic meal. Through our connection to the vine of life, we, as community, are nourished with the creative, loving, compassionate energy of God, with the very same energy that flowed through Jesus, the Christ.

In commenting on this part of John's Gospel the mystic, Meister Eckhart wrote: "A plum tree brings forth plums not by an act of will, but because it is its nature to do so. In the same way, the community of the people of God, gathered around Christ in the Eucharist, allowing the energy of Christ to flow unimpeded into and through all its branches, produces what, by its nature, it must: the fruit of compassion, mercy, kindness, patience, wisdom and love.

Jesus (and subsequently, John) uses the image of the vine to illustrate and explain his continuing connectedness to his disciples and their connectedness to God through him and their connectedness (and ours) to one another and to everyone whom they and we encounter. The challenge for us is to live and love as though we really value that connectedness. Our lives are about learning to bear, appreciate and reflect the beams of love.