

Year B Easter 5

Acts 8: 26-40

1 John 4: 7-21

John 15: 1-8

Abide in me as I abide in you

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

I have a confession to make... a while back in the course of my work I met someone who I will call Annie, and my first reaction was to hold back and not really engage with Annie. Annie was what I might then have labelled as 'other'; someone who I did not readily identify with and whose life I could not readily understand. In referring back to my last sermon, I was not seeing Annie with the eyes of Christ, who sees no one as 'other'; Christ sees everyone through a lens of love and compassion, wishing the best for all whom he meets. However, I was seeing with my human eyes, through lenses that see the world imperfectly, that can lead me to focus away from love and compassion, that sees 'other' and leads to feelings of discomfort, awkwardness and yes, on occasions, irrational fear.

Annie was aged around 60 I guessed, was about five foot ten tall, had square shoulders, a fairly prominent Adam's apple, a strong jaw line, and was obviously wearing a wig of shoulder length luxuriant hair. Annie had nice dangling earrings and a matching necklace of bright colours. Annie had a brightly coloured dress on that clearly matched the jewellery. There was no mistaking the fact that Annie was a man, dressed as a woman.

However, I was at work, and I put my personal hesitancy to one side and engaged Annie in conversation. Annie was quite open about her

life story and her life choices. She – for Annie wished to be known by the female pronoun - had for as long as she could remember felt she was female whilst physically being male. Her mental health suffered, especially as she buried those feelings inside, with societal norms and so much else besides saying it was wrong. It was only a year or so before I met her that she had the courage to talk to a professional about her inner feelings, and to start to present as a woman, moving from Andy to Annie, from 'he' to 'she'.

Annie described how her life had been devoid of love, of joy, of personal fulfilment, full of sadness and loneliness. To a large extent that changed after she chose to present in the gender that she felt was her true identity. However, life was not easy, and she has been the victim of hate crimes including physical assault since.

Annie was certain that despite the challenges, she was far happier now than she was in her previous identity. Annie said she would not wish to undergo any operations to physically transition, maybe if she was forty years younger...

In getting to know Annie and in listening to her life story, I moved from seeing her as 'other' to seeing her as an individual on a journey through life struggling to come to terms with who she believed she was meant to be; to be a fully whole person in this world, living a fulfilled life. Annie had a real heart for her community and did a lot for her neighbours and friends. Those who took the time to get to know her, saw her as an asset to her community.

I would like to contrast that story with my experiences of working with an ordained minister who I will call Adam. Adam has great pastoral skills, works tirelessly and is greatly valued by his church community, contributing so much to the wellbeing of all whom he meets. I easily and quickly identified with Adam and his heart for ministry. It was quite easy to see him as Christ sees, he was not 'other', but just like me and many other ministers. It was a long time

after I met Adam that he told me that he had transitioned from female to male many years before. I had no idea. He presented physically as male, and there were no clues to his birth gender.

What was there in my reaction to Annie and Adam that was different? It was their physical appearance. Apart from that, in their own ways, they were leading a fulfilling life, and were valued members of their respective communities. One a secular community in a neighbourhood, and one in ministry serving a faith community.

Does God not see beneath the physical and examine our hearts, and sees our actions motivated by our heart's desires?

Over the course of my work in HR I helped several employees inform their colleagues about their intention to transition their gender. Luckily, to most of their colleagues it never came as a big surprise, and the majority were very supportive.

In my last professional HR role I drafted that organisation's first Gender Transition Policy and Procedure. It raised eyebrows with some of my colleagues who knew I was in the final year of my training leading to ordination; they somehow thought my duty as an employee would clash with my religious beliefs. It led to some really interesting conversations.

Hopefully you can see the link between our readings, especially from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and my experiences in HR and in ministry.

In Acts chapter 8 we read that an angel of the Lord said to Philip to go to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza and join an Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot. Philip did so and was moved by the Holy Spirit to baptise the eunuch.

“So what?”, we may say. The apostles were being sent out by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost to baptise and bring people to faith.

But, the Torah - the teachings contained in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures - forbade a eunuch from ever being admitted in to the assembly of God’s kingdom (cf Deut 23:1). For Philip, the Holy Spirit was pointing the new way to understand God’s kingdom, to fulfilling Jesus’s new commandment to love one another just as he had loved them.

The action Philip took was not an errant act of a rogue agent of the apostles. We know this because the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away to continue proclaiming the good news to all the towns as he headed north towards Caesarea. In the story of Philip’s interaction with the eunuch there is no mention of Philip being hesitant to baptise the eunuch. Philip must have been so filled with the Holy Spirit to know that he was put in that place for a specific reason and acted accordingly.

In our reading from the first letter of John, we hear some very familiar words; words that we say each Sunday as we prepare to reflect on our actions in the past week and identify what we have not done and what we should have done. We say, ‘God is love and we are God’s children. There is no room for fear in love. We love because God loved us first.’

John’s letter is truly radical in nature, calling us to love one another. It states that “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... We love because he first loved us. Those who say ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars”

Wow! That is such strong stuff. If we are uncomfortable with that as a universal statement we can weaken it by trying to define who our brothers and sisters are, but we then create a ‘them and ‘us’, and we

start to label people as 'other' ... I don't think that is what Jesus' teaching was saying.

In our gospel reading we have that fabulous passage about the true vine. We are called to bear much fruit; another way of saying that Jesus is calling us to self-giving love. The fruit we are to bear? Well, is it not acts of love and charity, not just to our own church members, but outside of the church community, just as Philip was called by the Holy Spirit outside of the faith community he was comfortable in? Is it not to the sick, the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the prisoner and the orphan?

Jesus says, 'Abide in me as I abide in you'. It is a simple statement, so full of meaning, so full of power, so full of promise. It speaks of the deep spiritual relationship between each of those disciples and also between Jesus and each of the disciples. Jesus is with them at all times and in all places. The 'abiding' is to enable the new commandment of love to bear fruit through their actions. Love stops us being inward-facing, focussed on our own little worlds, being self-absorbed, and not looking out to where people are hurting, where people are struggling, where people need to know the love of God, the love of Christ, and the warm embrace of the love of the Holy Spirit. In this passage Jesus is also clear that when we do not bear the fruit, when we are not being fruitful in works of love, we are pruned back.

The resurrection we celebrated on Easter Day, just five Sundays ago, reveals a new understanding; an understanding of a radically different approach – a new world or should I say kingdom order, if you will. Evil doesn't have the last word, God's love is the power that conquers all.

In abiding in Christ ourselves, Jesus is our example of how to live our lives – it seems an impossibly high standard, and let's not fool ourselves, it is. Each day we can strive, millimetre by millimetre to

get ever closer to Christ's example. And what can help us each day? Christ said, 'Abide in me as I abide in you.' God is within each and everyone of us. We just need to stop and listen for the small still voice, not in the whirlwind, not in the fire or the storm, but in the silence. When we feel challenged by something, we often feel we are in the midst of a storm. Our discernment of the Holy Spirit is unlikely to happen then, but after careful quiet reflection. If there is a choice between love or hate, choose love every time. That is what Jesus did.

Christ said, 'Abide in me as I abide in you.'

We have the knowledge of all of Jesus's teachings and healings; his love for the outcast and sinner, the oppressed, the weak, the infirm. In abiding with Christ, how can we love more fully, just as Jesus did?

I wonder what helps each one of us be more loving?

When we know that, and we practice it, I believe we get a better understanding of what it means to abide in Jesus.

Today, I have intentionally used real life experiences of mine which you may feel are provocative illustrations of what God's love is all about.

I could have chosen a softer and easier image, maybe a story of a smelly tramp I knew who transformed into a clean and well-mannered old man.

However, the Holy Spirit is there to disturb us, unsettle us, to challenge us, to animate us, to help usher in changes that brings God's kingdom closer. A story about a tramp is unlikely to have done that.

I am aware that picking examples of gender transition, as I felt led to do today, may have produced a wide range of reactions. I pray that you may prayerfully and honestly reflect on those reactions and read again the readings we have had today. Just as my initial reaction when meeting Annie for the first time made me feel uncomfortable.

Peter baptised a eunuch – the Torah would have excluded him from God's kingdom but the Holy Spirit invited him into God's kingdom. John's letter tells us to love, and not to fear; to love God and not hate anyone.

John's gospel reminds us that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit abides within us, and in love, will guide us.

May we all let the Holy Spirit be our guide and may we all bear the fruit of Christ's love in the world.