

# Belonging

a sermon preached on the

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Sunday 10 May 2009

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lection: Acts 8:26-40, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

Belonging is our overwhelming desire – perhaps our greatest desire. We want to belong, to some-one, to some-thing, to a group, to a family, to an ideology, to a nation, to a land, to a deity. There has been a great deal of ink spilt in recent years about an alleged distinction between ‘believing’ and ‘belonging’ – it is generally agreed by those who promote this distinction that modern people do not want to believe, but they do want to belong. I am not convinced - it seems too tidy, too rational, and too much driven, if we’re honest, by anxiety about the future of the church and how we can improve our scalp-hunting techniques. My lack of conviction about this is partly driven by an increasing sense that we have wildly over-stated ‘belief’ as verbal-intellectual assent to rational propositions. In any case, believing seems to me to be a sub-set of belonging. Human consciousness dawns as utterly dependent and frail beings who belong to an-other – in the ideal circumstance, a fully-present loving mother and father. If I ‘believe in’ parental love, it is only because I have first experienced a sense of belonging through them. From those earliest moments on, belonging remains the ache of the heart. Everything I have ever believed and done now seems to me to be driven by my desire to belong.

So when I read that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, and that he desires that we experience a mutual abiding in this intimate relationship, I become aware again of my deep desire to belong. Without doubt it was this yearning to experience the most ultimate and complete belonging possible that motivated me to attend a church for the first time. It was, after all, a desire for a somewhat less-than-cosmic belonging with a lovely young woman (which of course seemed at the time to be ultimate and complete!) that proved to be the initial motivating force. So when I read that “whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers,” and that “such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned,”<sup>1</sup> I immediately recognise the feeling of utter desolation and dark despair that results from the devastation which is the loss of belonging. When a sense of belonging is no longer felt, for whatever reason, we feel that we can do nothing, that we are useless, paralysed, empty – we may even feel that we *are* nothing. It is like being a withered branch, and for this reason may even be accompanied by a self-annihilation wish. But in spite of our small and fearful and rivalrous selves, and even through our felt sense of being nothing, God is glorified by this - that we *will* experience ultimate belonging, the intimacy of complete union, a union which results in the bearing of much fruit.

Did you hear how unexpected that is? It is the complete opposite of much that passes for religion. God is not glorified by our believing a difficult set of rational propositions. God is not glorified by our attending a church. God is not glorified by our doing a million good works even. God is glorified by our abiding in Christ, by our complete union in the true vine, whose purposes are eternally and cosmically fruit-full. Furthermore, belonging is our deepest desire, because it is apparently God’s desire in the first place. This has been expressed in a myriad of ways by the saints down the Christian centuries, in these words by the 14<sup>th</sup> century anchorite Dame Julian of Norwich: “For until I am one with Him, I can never have true rest or peace. I can never know it until I am held so close to Her that there is nothing in between.”<sup>2</sup>

So resurrection life is precisely this – that we abide intimately and fully in Christ the true vine, by the power of the Spirit, thus bearing fruit of eternal and cosmic significance. Resurrection life is *not* demonstrated by

<sup>1</sup> John 15:6

<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich (trans. James Walsh) *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 5, Wheathampstead, Anthony Clarke, 1991, p53.

empty tomb, but, through the work of the promised Holy Spirit, by intimate union, by complete belonging, in the true vine, which bears much fruit. “No one has ever seen God;” the letter of John declares, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is made complete in us.”<sup>3</sup> “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”<sup>4</sup> Union, belonging, completeness, abiding in the true vine, fruit-bearing and love are inseparable.

Saying that, it has to be admitted that the notion of love is highly problematic for us and our generation, its meaning stretched to breaking point by so many competing claims. Whatever claims may be made to the definition of love, John supplies the one necessary definition for Christians: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”<sup>5</sup> Our deep desire for belonging itself comes from God, is implanted into our human consciousness even before we are conscious, by the Divine love. Our quest to belong finds its deepest expression though intimacy in Christ the true vine who is the atoning sacrifice which heals sin, which is separation, loss of belonging. That, presumably, is why our most complete sense of belonging always arises out of sacrifice, atonement. To borrow from Meister Eckhart, what use is it to us that Christ is the atoning sacrifice, if we ourselves are not also, each of us, an atoning sacrifice?

Thus, in this way is found the deepest, fullest experience of belonging, the completeness promised in the gospel – that we ourselves participate in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Not that the atoning sacrifice is merely something Christ did once for us and instead of us, but that we ourselves drink the cup with him, that sharing in the one bread we are actually the Body of Christ. Confession that ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ means very little as mere historical fact or verbal statement. Confession, rather, is eating the flesh of Christ, drinking Christ’s cup, abiding intimately in Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Of course, neither is the liturgical action the end, but the sign and promise that we shall ‘Become what we eat!’ What use is it to us that Christ is the atoning sacrifice, if we ourselves are not also, each of us, an atoning sacrifice? Thus the deep belonging, union in the true vine, the completion which we so desire requires the whole of our lives and our bodies, a living, atoning sacrifice.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:12 The Greek word *τετελειωμενη* *teteleiōmenē* which is usually translated into the English ‘perfected’ literally means ‘has been completed’.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:10