

Easter 5

ChCh-St. Luke's

29th April 2018

Readings: Acts 8:26-40 Philip & the Ethiopian Eunuch
 1 John 4:7-21 God is love
 John 15:1-8 The vine and the branches

Reflection

When did you first fall in love?

Do you remember your feelings?

- the aching, passionate longing to be with your beloved every moment?
- the heart-pounding, knee-trembling anticipation of your first kiss?
- the overwhelming desire to never be parted from each other – to dwell with & in each other forever?

For some, this first love may be a present reality – for others, a distant memory or perhaps a bittersweet yearning...or right now, a strengthened commitment of enduring love (through joys and struggles, life and death) bound for all eternity.

I think my first *infatuation* happened in early adolescence, but my first *love* is happily (most of the time) - the one I celebrated forty years of marriage with this year!

Similar questions could be asked about our faith journey:

- when did you first fall in love with Jesus?
- was it a slow, imperceptible 'growing into love' – or a lightning-strike moment?
- who drew alongside you and helped reveal the story of God's love for you?
- how do you *continue* to respond to Jesus' invitation to 'abide in him'?

Answering these questions helps us to tell the story of *our* faith – something we are called to do, as Christian pilgrims and good stewards of the faith that has been handed down to us. It also involves taking the risk of being truly known – something Fr. Jim spoke of so well last Sunday.

Today's scripture readings seem highly appropriate as springboards to speaking of our own faith development: - The story of Philip drawing alongside the Ethiopian Eunuch on a desert road, and revealing Jesus to him.

- And the image of Jesus, the true vine - and we, the branches, abiding in Him.

For me, my faith story needs to acknowledge and honour those who have gone before me, together with present reality and an unfolding future – a many-branched faith story. This provides a foundation to my faith, just as our scriptures are built on the religious heritage of the Jewish nation. The picture of Israel as a vineyard or vine was spoken of by the prophets - and the vine in *golden* form, embellished the temple in Jerusalem. This powerful symbol was then drawn upon by Jesus, who – in the Johannine gospel - identified himself as the *true* vine, and we, the branches.

An early branch in my story was my maternal great-grandmother, who converted from the Church of England to Roman Catholicism. This made her a particularly fervent Roman Catholic, and the family vine branches followed this faith expression through my maternal grandmother, my mother, sister and wider family. (You could call me the black sheep of the family!)

I was grafted into the vine on the 14th April 1958 – the date of my baptism.

My grandmother and great uncle were strong role models in my faith development. They drew quietly alongside, revealing something of their own faithfulness and love of God. They lived their faith, expressing it in care for others, humility, sense of community and justice, and through undying hope in the face of adversity and death. I know their branches were regularly pruned by life, and they bore good fruit.

I remember fondly, my regular overnight stays with my grandmother - her sweet “God Bless” as she bade me goodnight, and in the morning, singing along with the Sunday morning hymns on the radio, before we set off on foot to attend Mass at the local church.

My own images of God at that time, reinforced by attendance at a convent school, included a somewhat scary, all-knowing God of wrath & judgement, together with a beautiful, gentle Jesus – the Good Shepherd – who held *me* within his loving embrace. I was very happy to abide in Him and sought solace in Him in times of loneliness, sadness and minor childhood persecutions from the local protestants!

My love and faithfulness became my own during adolescence and confirmation. However the ‘Helen branch’ of the vine took off during the teen years and lost touch with Jesus for some time. Of course, God never lost touch with Helen during those boundary-pushing, risk-taking, doubting and exploring years.

It was as a young mother that I returned to church, and it was a humble, deeply faithful farmer who became my ‘Philip’ – the one who gently drew alongside and helped reveal the scriptures to me, as I read with growing hunger, the word of God. He was willing to climb aboard my chariot – a chariot filled with an ever-growing family of preschoolers – and share his love of God and spiritual questions and understandings.

It was for me, a time of falling in love with Jesus, and committing afresh, my life to Him. And as I read, prayed, studied and worshipped in a diverse and faithful community of fellow pilgrims, I became more and more aware of God’s call on my life. It was a call that had begun in baptism and was now calling me to Holy Orders – a call that was so inviting, humbling, scary, exciting and seemingly impossible, that all I could do (after wrestling with it for some time) was to say “Yes”, handing it over to God (and you may be interested to hear that my “Yes”, at that dramatic moment, occurred during a Requiem Mass at St. Luke’s in the City!).

At about that time, and through a strange and circuitous route – a bit like the foreign route that Philip took south, to Gaza in the desert - I arrived with my family in the pews of the local Anglican Parish! The strange and circuitous routes have continued (here I am, back at St. Luke’s!) and I continue to enjoy getting to know this God of divine mystery, surprise, humour, faithfulness, playfulness, weeping and laughter.

I cannot imagine life without God. I cannot imagine life apart from a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus – knowing that I am beloved of God. Like each of you, through baptism, I am called to minister in Christ’s name. Through Holy Orders I am called to build

up Christ's congregation, to strengthen the baptized, and to lead them as witnesses to Christ in the world. And I thank God for this calling.

There are times when I am sent down desert roads, times when I am called to be a 'Philip' for someone else, times when I feel spiritually impotent and baffled, like the Ethiopian Eunuch. There are times when my branches race off in crazy directions and I need the loving vinedresser to give me a disciplined pruning back into shape, and a reminder that I am nothing unless abiding in Jesus, the true vine.

May each one of us – branches on the Jesus-vine, be faithful and fruitful stewards, celebrating and sharing God's love, rejoicing on our way!