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Dear Friends in the Northwest,

This Sunday is the fifth Sunday of Easter. There is a service at Ullapool at 10.00 a.m. This coming week, I am delighted that we will be welcoming Fr David Higgon back to the north-west for a few weeks. It will be good to see him again after such a long time away.

Looking ahead, Thursday 13th May is Ascension Day, an important Festival in the Church. There will be a service of Holy Eucharist at 11.00 a.m. in Ullapool on that day. Please let me know if you would like to attend the Thursday service as usual.

Advance notice that I will be on holiday from Monday 24th May through to Tuesday 2nd June inclusive. Fr David has kindly agreed to cover the service at Ullapool on Sunday 30th May.

*with love and prayers
Rev'd Clare,*

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

2nd May 2021

First Reading: Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord

snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Gospel: St John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Last week, we thought about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and that God calls us to love in action, not just in words. But what is it that provides the impetus and energy to do that, to live out our life in God's service and the service of all God's people?

In today's readings, we gain some insight into that question as, using more agricultural imagery, we think further about the way God loves and cares for us and what that, in turn, means for our relationships with others. In the Gospel, the imagery is of vineyards and vine-growing. Jesus says 'I am the true vine' – the last of the seven 'I am'

sayings in John's Gospel, and part of the Farewell Discourses, a large block of Jesus' teaching that he places after Judas has left the last supper and before Jesus and his disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane.

The context of vines and vineyards would have been familiar to Jesus' original hearers. Vines, along with olives and figs, are characteristic plants of Palestine, mentioned numerous times in the Bible. The tradition of growing grapevines goes back to the origins of civilisation. In Genesis, we are told that Noah was the first person to plant a vineyard, and they were also known in ancient Egypt. Vineyards, grapes and wine were a basic part of everyday life. Whilst the growing of vines is not familiar to most people in our society, and we may not immediately understand some of the subtleties, nevertheless we understand the general ideas alluded to in such imagery.

As part of my ongoing theological studies, I am currently taking a module on the book of Isaiah. By one of those odd coincidences, in our seminar this week, we looked at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 5, which gives a detailed description of planting a vineyard. Those who cared for the vines lived in a watchtower to make sure there was no damage by wild animals or thieves. Once the vines had flowered and the grapes were developing, non-fruiting branches were cut out and the fruiting branches pruned to make them stronger and yield more fruit.

In the Old Testament, the vine and vineyard are symbols of Israel, brought out of Egypt and planted by God. References to many vineyards, branches or clusters of grapes are all indicative of God's favour, and there is a rich tradition of this imagery in Jewish scripture, art and liturgy. Like the shepherd in last week's readings, God as vine-grower cared for and tended the vine. Isaiah described it as 'a choice vine', one that would yield superior grapes, but it 'went wild' and yielded inferior grapes. This is the background to some of the New Testament parables that use vineyard imagery: the labourers in the vineyard who all received the same pay for different lengths of time worked; the wicked tenants of the vineyard who killed the master's servants and then his son; the two sons asked to work in the vineyard, one who said he would but didn't and the other who said and did the opposite.

In John's Gospel, however, the understanding of the imagery is changed. God the Father is still the vine-grower, but Jesus is now the vine. Israel has gone 'wild', and it is no longer sufficient simply to be an Israelite; Jesus is the vital link to God. The vine and the branches show the intimate connection between Christ and his church; branches never exist on their own. And just as the vine-grower cuts out the dead branches and prunes the growing ones to bear more fruit, so God disciplines the church in order that it may be more fruitful.

This imagery can be quite uncomfortable. Discipline may be painful, and it's easy to feel one is not bearing much fruit, or not as much as one might. Sometimes, we should take those feelings on board and address them. However, we should remember that Jesus says that this pruning or 'cleansing' is achieved by the word he has already spoken to us. Also, that periods of dormancy prepare the vine for further fruitfulness - though we do need to distinguish between dormant and dead! The image of pruning reflects God's concern for the well-being and fruitfulness of individuals and the church as a whole.

The passage stresses the importance of dependence on the vine and vine-grower to be fruitful. Jesus says: 'Abide in me as I abide in you.' The word 'abide' appears eight times reminding us that disciples do not act by themselves or in their own strength, but if we rely on the vine and the vine-grower, great things are possible. This idea of abiding in God is also seen three times in today's reading from the first letter of John, where it is linked to the gift of the Holy

Spirit, to confession of Jesus as Son of God, and finally to love where it says '...those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.'

We are reminded that we love because God first loved us, something we hear at our services in the introduction to the confession. Love is the nature of God and, reflecting that love, our love of one another is the only possible response. One commentator said that, by the time one gets to the fourth chapter of the first letter of John, the love theme begins to sound as if it is on repeat. Certainly, it is a dominant theme, presumably because, as I mentioned when we had our first reading from this letter, it was written to a community split by disagreement and in need of reconciliation. In focussing on love, the letter challenges ideas of who is 'in' and who is 'out', of boundaries between groups of people, 'them' and 'us'.

Unfortunately, the church has been good at drawing such boundaries. Our society does it all the time. People, some of us perhaps, whose position is privileged, whether they acknowledge that or not, determine who is 'in' and who is 'out' in many different situations: who gets a voice in public debate and who has to remain silent; who gets access to public services and who does not; who has refugee status and the right to remain and who does not. Of course, some such decisions are necessary ... and they are difficult.

The early church recognised a need to push against all such boundaries of who may belong to God's people. In the community that the first letter of John was written to, they were reminded that all belonged, despite their disagreements. Today's passage from Acts illustrates this too. In the early part of Acts, there is evidence of some divisions between the Jewish and Hellenist Christians. As persecution of the church in Jerusalem increased, there was a scattering of believers. A result of this was the spread of the Christian faith in some directions the first believers would have found surprising, of which we have one example today. The Ethiopian was a foreigner, rich, perhaps Jewish, but nevertheless an outsider, from the very limits of the known world. Having been to Jerusalem to worship – and what he would have been able to do there would have been limited by the Temple regulations – he was reading Isaiah. Philip's appearance, prompted by an angel, to interpret the text enabled them both to recognise the inclusivity of God's kingdom. The Ethiopian was baptised and went on his way rejoicing, a new branch of the vine. It is reminder to us in the church today that growth generally happens at the periphery, not at the centre, by seizing unexpected, and perhaps surprising, opportunities.

To return to my original question, what is it that provides the impetus and energy to live out our life in God's service and the service of all God's people? The simple answer is God does. We are not alone, we are branches of the true vine, intimately connected to Christ. By abiding in God's love, nurturing that relationship, God cares for and nurtures us, so that we may be fruitful in his service. So that we may share that love, reaching out to those on the periphery and breaking down boundaries.