

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.

+ In the name of God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This year at St Martin-in-the-Fields where I work as a priest I had a shock in one of the Lent groups which I was leading about the Gospel of John. We had reached these passages where Jesus likens his relationship to his disciples to his being a vine in which the disciples are the branches. The branches to bear fruit are to stay in Jesus, abide in him as he does in the Father. I had a perfectly normal group of people to deal with so was rather taken aback when they almost all said they didn't like these passages or this idea, didn't really understand it and found it a bit scary!

At first I didn't know what they meant – as a girl from farming country in Devon I am used to growing things and as an adult can think of no happier holiday than a summer week in France, visiting vineyards and drinking a glass of wine over supper. What's the problem?

But then I looked again – branches being lopped off and thrown into a fire, the pressure to bear much fruit, and the whole business of “staying in Jesus” as if we cannot move or be ourselves, not daring to take a wrong step – well that is scary.

People's reactions shook me. They showed me how many of us deep inside have a scary picture of God who demands that we live in a certain way, stay in a particularly holy frame of mind, and above all do a lot of work for the Church – bear much fruit!

I learned a lot about a rather different sort of God from this in my time in Soho where I was the rector for 9 years. There we had few scary pictures of God because people washed up in the West End because they were asylum seekers , or gay and unable to go home, or pleasure seekers or just downright poor – these people desperately needed love and forgiveness and acceptance so we tried to give those things to one another. There was simply no point in having Church rules about who could belong and rise to leadership positions – if gay people or divorced people or people living together outside marriage could not be our leaders we would have had no leaders! If children couldn't play a full part from day one, whether baptized or confirmed or not, they simply wouldn't be there – they wouldn't wait around long enough to learn the rules! And if old people were not offered the space at a bar to tell their rather raucous stories and dance their old –fashioned dances they wouldn't be there either! There seemed to be no point in a church which is empty of people – *we did have one by the way, I kid you not* – ours was full but full of people who had broken all the rules. And so I learned that God's new life comes to all and renews all – I have come so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be FULL! And if I wasn't willing to learn that, there would be very little point in my being there. That meant that all parts of me were accepted by God too!

That work led me in to being the National Coordinator for Inclusive Church which is my job today. In Inclusive Church we spend our time saying God is not scary, God comes to us in the things of this world and in love and says to us I want to make you my friends. When we make God scary its because we have deep inside us wounds which make love scary. When we make God scary its because we live in a culture which is so competitive , which makes us feel we are unacceptable,

so we give God a voice saying You are unacceptable. Or we have had so many people – parents , teachers , friends – saying to us We love you But – you could look better , study harder , work faster , BE better – that we think that to be in God must somehow mean that we have to be heaps better than we are! Being in God would have to mean that we close down on being us!

*The Apprentice , in the Board room , it would be so much better if those guys said yea , I see what you mean , I am like that instead of fighting back I am not like that , I'm never selfish , I'm always kind and gentle and creative and it's the other guy's fault! I am sure Sir Alan would like them more if they laughed and said yea that is what I am like. And I think we see God like Sir Alan – instead of offering us joy saying – you , you're fired!*

In Inclusive Church we lobby – for women to become bishops, for gay people to be able to be open about their lives and their partnerships and still be ordained as deacon , priest and bishop, we lobby for there to be an increase in black leadership in the Church and for an end to world poverty.

And we lobby not only because we believe these things to be good and important in themselves, but also because we believe God loves all of us equally, that the voiceless people and the voiceless parts of ourselves should be given the chance to speak and those hidden in darkness in our society and those parts of us hidden in the dark should come out into the light. God is not Sir Alan, God is inclusion, aiming, struggling, touching, healing, reaching out in love to keep everybody in! Abide in me.....

Today's Bible reading from the book of Acts is only a few lines long yet it describes some astonishing events. Something extraordinary has already happened. Peter, the one who denies Jesus three times is now the one who knows, in the risen Christ,

that he is utterly forgiven , loved and accepted. He is empowered with courage to speak out about Jesus where it is very dangerous to do so – the last thing the authorities want at this stage is yet more trouble of the same sort in Jerusalem – yet he keeps talking of the faith in the risen Christ that is in him, ignoring all danger to the self, he is a new creation.

Then the Spirit of God rains down **not** on his chosen people only , the people of the covenant , those whom he has always loved but on the outsider , the Gentile , the one who has not waited around to learn the rules and then get circumcised. There is an immediacy to this love, there is a new creation, the people of God are all people created by God, Parthian and Mede and Elamite, Moslem and Hindu and Zen Buddhist , the inhabitants of Nottingham and Iraq and the people of Sri Lanka including the North East of Sri Lanka – the people of God are all people created by God.

This realisation allows Peter to use the signs of the Gospel in a new way. Baptism is not going to be a narrow gate, there when people have learnt all the codes and rules and assented to a set of words – here is the water, be splashed in the grace and inclusion of God, now , a new creation. Where have we lost that immediacy!

Peter and the rest of the disciples are now filled with the new life of the Risen Jesus, and to whom to they go to heal and touch , to love and welcome , the Gentiles. The new creation is for all – all are welcomed, touched, healed , forgiven, taught , led into the life of God to be a new community where the values of this world are utterly overturned and the last first!

I no longer call you servants , I call you friends , let my joy be in you and your joy full. Being a friend of Jesus does not mean there are no expectations of us , boundaries to make , stones to stumble over as we learn to love – just no need for anxiety! And that's where this staying in business comes in , this abiding in Christ ,

perhaps we would say this “staying close to Jesus” That’s where all this vine stuff fits..

Because love like this in the new creation is costly and difficult. It is not easy to love ourselves , let alone others , let alone all others which is our calling as Christians! To do that one price we have to learn to pay is to spend time with God, listening to God , learning Christ’s way, attending with longing for the Spirit’s guidance and help, warnings and laughter. Time in prayer , however we do prayer , time in reading the Bible hearing the stories of Jesus , however we do it, time listening to and being with wise Christian friends – all this is not an add on – it is learning to savour, delight in , listen to , abide in God.

In a moment we enter into table fellowship with the Risen Christ. As we take him in in bread and wine, digest his presence, see him around us and between us may he live in us, bring us new life, and make us his risen joyful body in the world. Amen