

Easter 4
21/4/2024

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 3:16-24
Psalm 23
John 10:11-18

Abide

“All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.”

The notion of “abiding” is an important one in John's writings. The Greek word translated here could also be translated as remain, stay, live, or dwell. There is a strong sense of “where we are.”

Yet this is not simply a nice idea by which we evoke a sense of cosiness with God. Most of the things which matter in the scriptural descriptions of the relationships which ought to stand between ourselves and our gods are a matter of polemic: not this, but that; not here but there; not this way, but that way. It is the same with John's call to abide in Christ: abide *here*, not somewhere else. Or, let this one abide in you, and not some other.

There are indeed many places where we might abide and many things which might abide in us. Among these, the geographical options are the least interesting. Much more important is *how* we are living wherever we happen to be. This is, in one sense, a matter of morals – what we do and don't do to ourselves or each other. There is certainly a strong commandment to be heard in our reading this morning: “Love one another”. And there is some basic shape given to that as well: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” But the idea of abiding is as much a matter of our *approach* to our situation – the choice we make about where we find ourselves.

So, what kind of abiding places present themselves to us? The past is one tempting place: nostalgia for a time when things seemed simpler. Perhaps they were not simpler, but we were more energetic or had more power over the events which affected us directly, or were simply less aware of what was actually going on. Another tempting place of abode is the future – putting off making the most of where we are now, even perhaps denying justice to others now because we think that this will get us where we want to be in the long term. Whether it is nostalgia or a vision of where we imagine we are heading, where we actually are here and now is reduced to a life we simply have to endure, either because the best is now behind us or we must wait for it to come.

Alternatively, we might desire to abide in an identity other than the one which is really ours – denying, or at least lamenting, the religious or cultural or gender or age or economic identity we actually have. This is the cry for justice, whether in economic or social or “psychological” terms. We are not acknowledged for what we think we are worth or for the effort we have put in.

Or perhaps we just don't know where we are, but that it's not yet the right place.

And then there are the kinds of things in which we might abide in us. These are about the role we play in the story we seem to be living. Positively, Goodwill, compassion and love might abide in us. Or less negatively, selfishness, distraction, self-delusion, or fear. The difference between these two outlooks is the difference between choosing to be fully alive where we are, whatever its realities, and living as if we are in just a place to escape. It is that latter option which John addresses in his letter today: in this God, we

have the power to live where we are – *here, now* – whether in green pastures by still waters, or on a cross.

Where we *would* abide – where would we live if we had the choice – is an intensely personal thing but it has to do with where we think we'd feel safest and most able to be ourselves. But life is not simply a matter of safety; it is also a matter of truth. And truth and life meet in the idea of vocation, or calling – God's calling of us into where we actually are – and it engages every level of our lives. At the personal level, it has to do with being with the people to whom we actually *are* married, or with whom we actually do work, or next to whom we actually live, or with whom we share an identity as members of a church congregation. Who wants to abide with the cranky or noisy neighbour, the lazy colleague, the self-righteous or indifferent pew-sitter? Which nation wants to be in the political context of massive human displacement, bringing in refugees for whom we haven't budgeted, who are different from us, whom we don't understand? Which church would not choose a *different* time and space to be church – perhaps one of not-so-distant memory, rather than one in which congregations get smaller by one or two each year, find it harder to keep the budget balanced, find a minister, or simply keep going?

In contrast to so many of the realities of our lives, who would not choose rather to be led by green pastures and to lie down beside still waters? And, yet, the psalmist who speaks of green pastures and still waters speaks also of walking through the darkest valley, of a table of abundance spread even in the presence of his enemies, his head anointed, his cup running over. St Augustine declared that the singer of the psalms is Jesus himself. This is a helpful thought to the extent that it claims the psalms as the prayer the prayers of the one the church believes to be *the* true human being, the prayers of one who lives as and where it is given him to be. Green pastures or the valley of the shadow of death – these are much of a muchness when lived in and watched over by *this* Shepherd.

To abide in this Shepherd is to rise to a life of courage, although not bravado. There is here no call to brace ourselves, to muscle up as best we can and charge at those obstacles which seem to stand in our way. Rather, we are called to abide in a different reality – in the reality which is the humanity of Jesus himself, properly connected to the very source of life itself.

This, John says, is possible because Jesus himself abides in us. This is not a mystical or spooky reality – a merely spiritual thing which no one can see. If it were, then John would not speak of the commandment by which the reality of Jesus is proven: love one another. Love, that is, those real and tangible others who are within your reach, who constitute the place, the story, in which you live. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for those who are your particular ‘other’ .” (cf. John 13.35). By this, we will also know *ourselves* to be his disciples – if we have love. In this way, Jesus abides in us, as we are to abide in him.

In the end, this is all that we need to concern ourselves with along the way. What does the moment demand? Love of those with whom it is given to us to abide: to be present, to respond to the demands of the present.

This is the work of our lives. This is how we abide in him, and he in us. In this way, what the psalm-singing Christ himself knows can become what we too come to know: a life – a troubled life, most likely – shot through with goodness and mercy, a dwelling place with God all the days of our lives.

By the grace of God, may such a life be *our* place of abode, *our* habitation, *our* home. Amen.
