

"I am the vine, ye are the branches...abide in my love"

Through the eyes of John, we enter into an understanding of the images belonging to the redemption of our humanity. The gospel lesson which Ashley read is the last, and to my mind, the greatest of the so-called "I am" sayings of Jesus, sayings which signify his identity with us in his essential identity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We have our abiding in the understanding of that divine fellowship, the fellowship of the Trinity. *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, abide in my love."* And perhaps the hardest thing for us to grasp in an age of sceptical subjectivism is that it is *"a knowing love."* We find our abiding in words and through words in us, words conveying an understanding, words conveying life and love and joy. *"These things I have spoken to you, that my love may be in you, and that your joy may be full."*

This is, of course, a day full of joy. You are the pride of the school, the pride of your parents and grandparents. We rejoice in you all, in your achievements, your efforts, your accomplishments. They are many, but it is the spirit in which you have carried yourselves in good times and hard times that perhaps matters the most.

This school has been your place of abiding and now, today, you step up and step out. It is your graduation day! Why then all this talk of abiding? Because it is our reasonable hope and prayer that what has belonged to this place of your abiding over the last number of years - these formative years - will indeed remain, abide, in you. You step up today because you have made the grade, you move on but you do so on the basis of foundations which have been established in you during your time of abiding here. There are things which remain and abide in you which belong to who you are. They are the things which belong, I hope, to the understanding.

Abiding. It seems to suggest something static and unchanging, something fixed and unmoving, but the gospel lesson makes it clear that this is not so. No. The image of abiding is intimately connected to the metaphor of gardening, to the vineyard, to the vine and the branches. It is an image of cultivation, of growth and maturation, and as such it is inescapably connected to the educational activity whereby we are not only led out of ourselves but drawn out of barbarity into civilised life and order, into an objective order of truth and understanding. Education is about erudition, literally, being drawn out of rudeness, out of the rough wilderness of ourselves in *"the devices and desires"* of our own foolish hearts. We are drawn into an understanding which redeems our human desiring. The words are meant to live in us, shaping us in the understanding which they convey.

But only if we read and think. And therein lies the struggle, our contemporary

struggle. The condition of so-called 'postmodernity' carries with it an attitude against the possibilities of understanding anything. It is captured popularly in Pink Floyd's "*We don't need no education*", the double negative suggesting more about what they don't have as well as indicating what in fact they need! and more philosophically, by Jean-François Lyotard's "*incredulity toward metanarratives*" which allows, if indeed it does not actually imply, a forsaking of the images, an emptying of story of any meaning. We are left with a willful playfulness that is devoid of the serious joy of learning.

At its best, of course, and in its truth, perhaps, postmodernism helps us to raise the critical questions that deepen the understanding. As is so often the case, the corrective comes from within. The leading Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, has wonderfully and profoundly pointed out that the language of overcoming - that is to say, the language of atheism - actually has its provenance in the doctrine of the Trinity! We are all, inescapably, part of a larger discourse.

It is what we have tried to remind ourselves here in the Chapel. Through the understanding of the images of Scripture we have tried to see the threads of connection to every other aspect of human culture and life. It is all really a kind of reading which never really ends. We simply mark the various stages along the way within "*the vault and scope and schooling/And mastery in the mind*", as Hopkins puts it (*Morning, Midday, and Evening Sacrifice*). That "*mastery in the mind*" is the understanding.

"*Of making many books there is no end*", as Chris read to us from that great, little book of ancient biblical philosophy, *Ecclesiastes*. Make no mistake, the making of books will not end. And while there may be "*a weariness of the flesh in much study*", surely there is, too, a delight of the mind that remains and abides in you. "*Fear God, and keep his commandments*", the philosopher advises, "*for this is the whole duty of man*", suggesting at the very least that we are constituted for something more than the empty vanity of everything that is simply "*under the sun.*"

This school has been your place of abiding in the ways of understanding and love. "*Abide in my love*", Jesus says, and something of the meaning of that abiding is captured in the overarching icon of care here in the chapel - the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. May it be a reminder to you of the care that has challenged and guided you during your years here. And may it challenge you to act out of the same care that has been shown to you as you go forth from here. Much has been given to you. To abide in what has been opened out to you here means to build upon it in lives of service and sacrifice to others as you take your place as adults in the human community with adult responsibilities and adult duties.

No doubt, there will be hardships and struggles in your lives but to abide in the

understanding means to know, too, that *"sweet are the uses of adversity"* as Shakespeare puts it, such that *"this our life exempt from public haunt"*, when we feel that we are in a deep, dark wood, nonetheless *"finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks/sermons in stones and good in everything"* (*As You Like It*).

You have all become quite dear to us and we shall miss you but we bid you *"adieu"* this day, literally, *"to God"*. Go with God abiding in his love for you.

"I am the vine, ye are the branches...abide in my love"

Rev'd David Curry
Chaplain
Encaenia – King's-Edgehill School
June 2001