

## THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (5 May 2024)

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:9-17 – NRSV)

### **Introductory notes**

#### General

Today's text must be taken together with the Gospel of the Fifth Sunday of Easter – John 15:1-8. Verse 8 – the last verse of last Sunday's text – is: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples". This leads nicely into Verse 9 – the first verse of this Sunday's text: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love". The basis for both texts is the metaphor of the vine: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower" (John 15:1). Central to each is a reference to the Father.

The role of the Father is a crucial theme of John's Gospel. The following are just a few other references to this teaching:

"Then Jesus cried aloud: 'Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me'. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me'" (12:44-45).

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

"No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (John 6:44).

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9-11).

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11).

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

A key to understanding the way the Father and the Son work together for us, is found in John’s use of the Greek verb *menein*, “abide”. “The verb *menein* appears ten times in vv. 1–11 and is the unifying feature of that section of the discourse.” (Francis J Moloney SDB, *The Gospel of John*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998, 423.)

Read the following sentences thoughtfully, in the manner of *lectio divina*. Let the word “abide” speak to your heart:

“Abide in me as I abide in you” (15:4).

“The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (15:4).

“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (15:5).

“Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (15:6).

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (15:7).

“Abide in my love” (15:9).

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (15:10).

Recall the Letter of Jude verse 21: “Keep yourselves in the love of God”.

### Specific

As: Raymond Brown makes an important observation about this little word – *kathōs*: “For John *kathōs* is not only comparative but also causative or constitutive, meaning ‘inasmuch as’ (BDF, §453<sup>2</sup>; NOTE on 17:21). The Father’s love for Jesus is the basis of Jesus’ love for his disciples both as to origin and intensity. The Son loves his disciples with the same divine love the Father has for him” (Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel according to John (XIII-XXI): Introduction, translation, and notes* (Vol. 29A), New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008, 663)

*the Father has loved me*: Again, Raymond Brown: “The vocabulary for love in 9, 10, 12, 13a, and 17 is *agapan/agapē*, while in 13b, 14, and 15 there are instances of *philos* (see NOTE on 13). In 3:35, 10:17 (*agapan*) and in 5:20 (*philein*) the Father’s love for Jesus is expressed in the present tense, an indication of its continuous character. Here and in 17:24, 26 the tense

is aorist, and the emphasis is on the expression of the love in Jesus' giving himself for men—a supreme act of love well expressed by the aorist. Of course, this emphasis does not exclude the continuity of love, as may be seen in the last line of 10. Spicq, RB 65 (1958), 358, contends that in the 1st century *agapan* had the connotation of love made manifest. Thus, the Father loved the son before the creation of the world (17:24) and this love became manifest when He sent the Son into the world (3:16)" (Ibid).

See also John's First Letter: "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" (1 John 4:7-12).

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you:* The key is the last phrase – "as I have loved you". The Greek verb, here translated as "love", is *agapao*. We are called to the highest form of love – the love with which Jesus has loved us. How can this be? That kind of love is surely beyond us? We must understand this in the light of what we have discussed above. The life of the Father – the life of Love – is made available to us in and through Jesus. "Abide in my love" (15:9). This is not a call to Stoic self-mastery. It is rather an invitation to let God be God in us.

*To lay down one's life for one's friends:* When we "abide in (his) love" everything changes. The deeper and more all-encompassing that "abiding", the deeper and more all-encompassing the consequences. It may even lead to laying down one's life. "Christian love does not simply *consist* in laying down one's life; but because it stems from Jesus, there is a tendency in Christian love that produces such self-sacrifice. That is why John 15:13 has left a greater mark on subsequent behavior than, for example, a similar sentence in Plato (*Symposium* 179B): 'Only those who love wish to die for others'" (Raymond E Brown, op cit, 664.)

Raymond Brown continues: "The English word 'friend' does not capture sufficiently this relationship of love (for we have lost the feeling that 'friend' is related to the Anglo-Saxon verb *frēon*, 'to love'). In Johannine thought Jesus is not addressing the disciples here as casually as he addresses them in Luke 12:4: 'I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body'—the only Synoptic use of *philos* for the disciples. Rather vs. 14 is similar to 10, and the 'You are my *philo*' of 14 is the equivalent of the 'You will remain in my love' of 10. Lazarus is the *philos* of Jesus (11:11) because Jesus loves him (*agapan* in 11:5: *philein* in 11:3). Sometimes in relation to this verse of John, the title of Abraham as 'the friend of God' is recalled (*philos* in James 2:23). However, it should be noted that the LXX of Isa 41:8 speaks of Abraham as the one 'whom God loved' (*agapan*). Thus the title of Abraham becomes

another example of our thesis that *philos* means ‘the beloved’” (Ibid). The statement of Jesus to the disciples – “You are my friends” – must be understood in this way.

*I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last*: This is a corollary of the foregoing. The true disciple, the one who “abides in his love”, will “bear fruit”. When God is allowed to be God in you and through you, there is no telling – in fact, no limiting – what can be achieved. Further, if that is the way you live, you will know what you should ask for and “the Father will give you whatever you ask him in (Jesus’) name”.

## **Reflection**

Our Gospel today – John 15:9-17 – contains nine explicit references to love. Together they emphasize a profound and practical truth: *Being a disciple of Jesus is being in love*. The first of these references sets the context for the others: The Father’s love for Jesus. In his First Letter John spells this out: “God is love . . . all love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God . . . 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” – see 1 John 4:8-10.

Jesus says: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love”. What is God’s purpose in all this? “So that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete . . . I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father . . . I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last”.

We could sum up Jesus’ words: “Just let us love you!” This is pure gift. We cannot merit this love, we are not expected to earn it. But we can make a choice to accept the gift and live in such a way that we enable this love to take hold in our hearts. That is in fact hard work! It demands constancy and endurance. However, as we allow ourselves to be drawn evermore deeply into being in love, all else will take care of itself.

This is the mystical heart of our faith. Listen to St John of the Cross: “The soul’s center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest center in God, it will know, love, and enjoy God with all its might. When it has not reached this point (as happens in this mortal life, in which the soul cannot reach God with all its strength, even though in its center – which is God through grace and his self-communication to it), it still has movement and strength for advancing further and is not satisfied. Although it is in its center, it is not yet in its deepest center, for it can go deeper in God” (St John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 1:12 – ICS Publications).

Until and unless enough Christians discover this mystical heart, until and unless it becomes the actual heart of the Christian life in the Church, talk about renewal and reform in the will remain just that – talk. Why would we not want this gift of God’s love with all our minds, our hearts and our souls? What and where are the obstacles?