Living in faith and love

Revd Ray Williamson
10th May 2009, Easter 5

A couple of days ago I read a review of a book, *Returning to Religion: Why a secular age is haunted by faith.* The reviewer said this is a ground-breaking and thought-provoking book that addresses a question most readers probably ask themselves regularly. Is religious faith on its way out, as secular atheists would have us believe, or are we witnessing a resurgence of faith, as some others would like to claim?

Traditional religious institutions, including the Church, are undoubtedly facing hard times. At the same time, we are increasingly concerned with questions of ultimate meaning, purpose and identity which might appropriately be described as 'religious'.

The author of this book begins with an underlying presupposition that "the religious inclinations, the need for a framework or orientation or object of devotion, is a human universal". The author believes that, as human beings, we have inescapable religious instincts.

Our presence here this morning is a sign that we are aware of those instincts and want to acknowledge them as an essential part of who and what we are—and consequently, we are people of faith. Our understanding of Christianity may differ—some more than others; our experience of faith may differ—some wider than others. But wherever we are on that faith journey, we are on it; and so we are people of faith. And so we know that faith brings a certain quality, an extra dimension, to life; it gives to our lives something that is important to us—something life-giving that we really could not do without.

As well as that, we all have had the experience of doing something for someone else, and of doing it because of love—genuine love, true love—that shows itself in action. And when we have that kind of experience, we know too the sense of satisfaction, fulfilment, that comes from it.

We do, indeed, enjoy blessing by living in faith and love. And we do not have the first (faith) without the second (love).

That is what we are asked to take from our readings today. We are asked to focus on the question of what it is to live the good news of God in Jesus Christ. And to see that it means being a person of faith and a person of love; that faith and love form a unity.

The Gospel reading today really goes deeply into the grounds of Jesus ' command to love. Love is the essential element in the constancy of faith; and when we hear the gospel passage this morning we are indeed being exhorted to remain constant in faith: that is what the words "abide in me" say to us very clearly.

The Acts reading introduces us to an Ethiopian eunuch who receives no other mention in the NT. He has been to Jerusalem to worship—he is a person of some religious faith. He also represents someone who is an utter outsider: he was from a distant country, and he was someone whose physical condition makes him unclean. The story may be told like this to show that with Easter a new day has dawned—all are invited and welcome into the new community of faith. The Ethiopian, we also discover, is seeking, asking the big questions about God and life, and he 's puzzled. And Philip meets him. And Philip engages the Ethiopian in conversation. He listens to his questions and speaks to him about Jesus. And the Ethiopian comes to faith and is baptised. The act of being baptised symbolises his becoming incorporated into the Body of Christ—the Vine—of abiding in him.

And here, this morning, as we baptise Dustin Jobe, we are engaging in that same ritual act, signifying that he too is being welcomed and made part of the Vine, the Body of Christ and embarking on a life in which he is invited to "abide in Christ". The ritual act of baptism also reminds the rest of us that we too, in our seeking to live the life of faith and love, are to abide in Christ, the true vine.

The Gospel reading today with its image of Jesus as the vine uses a picture/ idea that was part of Jesus ' own religious heritage. Over and over again in OT, the nation is pictured as the vine or vineyard of God. Isaiah: "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel". So, too, in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, the Psalms: the vine had become a symbol of the nation.

But in the gospel reading, Jesus is the true vine- the real, genuine vine. What is the point of the word 'true', real, genuine? The point is found in the fact that the symbol of the vine is never used in OT apart from the idea of degeneration. The point of Isaiah 's picture was that the vineyard has run wild. It was Jeremiah 's complaint that the nation had turned into "a degenerate plant of a strange vine". It was Hosea 's cry that the nation was an 'empty' vine. Therefore, it is as if Jesus was saying: "You think that because you are descendants of Abraham you are a branch in the true vine of God. But it is not the nation that is the true vine. The nation is a degenerate plant, as all your prophets saw. I am the true vine. My manner of life and faith is the abundant life God promised, and if you want life in abundance you must have a living faith in God through me. And to be fruitful, to grow in love without bitterness, to bring healing and wholeness and hope to people, you must abide in me". And that means allowing ourselves first to receive from God as Jesus did, receiving the sap of life and love through prayer and worship and meditation on the Scriptures and being willing to allow that life-giving energy to flow out to others, expressing Christ 's life and love in the world, producing fruit.

The image of the vine speaks of the intimacy of our relationship with God. It draws attention to the tree itself with its branches. As a branch receives from the whole tree its power to grow and to bear fruit, so is God the source of life for us.

Therefore, abide in God. It is a call to loyalty—to the relationship of faith; and faith is an unconditional decision: Christian faith is an unconditional decision to base one 's life on the Good News of God through Jesus, the Christ. "Abide" is a call to persistence in the life of faith.

But that means allowing oneself to be encompassed by the life of God, of allowing oneself to receive. The loyalty that is demanded is not primarily a being for, but a being from; it is not the holding of a position, but allowing oneself to be held, corresponding to the relation of branch to vine. Abiding in God is like that. That was the secret of Jesus ' life—his contact with God. Again and again he withdrew into a solitary place to draw on that divine source of life. It must be so with us. The constancy of that relationship of faith! But to be constant requires times of special effort, to be in contact with God the source of life: prayer and worship, absolutely essential. Therefore "abide" is a call to constancy of faith, and faith is primarily a being from: we derive our very being from God.

But then faith must also be a being for—for others. Faith is authentic only when it leads to "love one another". Faith must reveal itself in love for others—true love that shows itself in action. The reading from the First letter of John makes this abundantly clear. Faith and love is the theme of that reading. It makes it abundantly clear that there is an indissoluble connection between religion and every aspect of life. One of the things we are invited to take with us today is the conviction that living Christ 's life means being a person of faith and love; because faith and love are inseparable. The Christian life is fruitful, or it is a fraud. There are

many people who love without having faith, but the NT insists that you cannot have faith without love. And the reason is because God is love. John 's stark statement—the insight that God is love—speaks about how God acts towards us and all creation, always and everywhere with love—that power of love constantly at work in all life 's circumstances opening up the future to us. And God 's love fires, feeds our love, like the sap that flows from the vine to the branches. And love is the one sure indicator the NT gives of the work of God 's Spirit in our life. God loves us and we are to love, and the twist is, that our love for God must express itself, can only express itself, in love of other people, in practical, everyday, simple acts of love and kindness and forgiveness to others.

Christianity is based on the conviction that 'faith and love ' is written into the constitution of the universe and of human life because we believe in a God whose essential nature is love. It is this that answers that universal human need for a framework or orientation for life—for an object of devotion. This is the life we are invited to live as people who are disciples of Christ, who belong to him, who abide in him, the true vine.