

Abiding



Recently in Australia there has been heightened publicity concerning violent acts between people. First there was a stabbing event in April at the Westfield shopping centre, Bondi Junction, NSW, when six people were killed. Other stabbings have followed. Then there was a focus on the rise in domestic violence with protest marches, discussions and political decisions being made. We might well ask, what is going on? How can we as Christians respond to such violent relationships between our fellow men and women?

As we come towards the end of Eastertide, the Gospel readings for the fourth, fifth and sixth Sundays of Easter, have been about relationships - between a shepherd and his sheep (John 10:11-18), a vine and its branches (John 15:1-8), and Jesus and his disciples, as well as between the disciples themselves (John 15:9-17).

The relationship between a shepherd and his sheep in 1st century Palestine, was a close one. The shepherd knew his small flock of sheep and they knew him. They recognised his voice and came to him when he called them. He was

also the one who protected them from harm and would risk his life to keep them safe. The emphasis on the shepherd's ownership and care for his sheep, even to giving his life for them, symbolises Jesus dying on the cross for us.

The relationship between a vine and its branches, as seen in the picture above, is even closer than that of a shepherd and his sheep. The branches not only belong to the vine, they are part of it, and share in its life. The branches can only live, grow and produce fruit if they remain connected to, or abiding in, the vine. (The Greek word for 'abide' in John's Gospel can mean not only abide, but remain, stay, live, dwell, and continue or share in God's life.)

In John 15:4, Jesus says to his disciples, "Abide in me." This is imaged by the branches (disciples), abiding in the vine (Christ). The sap or life of the vine flows through its branches. Such a close relationship reminds us that we belong to and are loved by a God who is a Trinity of Persons abiding in love. It is a love that continually flows between the Father and the Son, and is the Holy Spirit. This loving relationship in God is opened up by Jesus to include his disciples, even us, and I believe, is offered to all God's loved creation, human and non-human.

When we remember that we are abiding in Christ, it can help us to be restful or comforted when we feel tempted to be anxious or stressed. However, Jesus tells us, we are to abide in him, *as he abides in us*, so abiding also demands activity from us, an activity of loving God and loving others.

As disciples of Jesus, at our Baptism we were cleansed from sin, given new life, joined to Christ and became members of his body, the Church. At our Confirmation our relationship with the Holy Spirit, which dwells within us and directs us, was strengthened. Each time we receive Holy Communion we receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, to feed us, and assist the love of God to grow in us and be revealed by us to others.

In John 15:12-14, Jesus says to his disciples, "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." We, as friends of Jesus, are to love our fellow Christians, our brothers, sisters and friends in Christ.

The greatest act of love for us is to use our life to help others. It may not be like a shepherd saving his sheep, or Jesus dying on the cross, but it can be a giving of ourselves in other costly ways. Perhaps we may do this by respecting *all* others, giving time to help them, listening to them, and praying for them, and in these acts loving them.

To love God and others, does not guarantee for us a happy contended life in which all goes well and there is no suffering. Usually it is the opposite. As Jesus' life demonstrated, and he explains in John 15:2, vines are pruned each year to remove branches that are dead or not needed. In fact, even branches that produce fruit are pruned to promote stronger growth and an increase of fruit. For us, pain and suffering can bring new life, better understanding and deeper loving relationships with God and other people.

Returning to the current situation concerning violence in relationships, can we as members of the Body of Christ, abiding in God's love and drawing on Christ's presence within us and around us, witness in our lives something of God's love by sharing it with others? Can we make an effort to love victims, and even perpetrators, in whom Christ abides and loves? After all, we are all part of God's loved creation and belong to God. Certainly we must condemn harmful and unjust acts, but we are also to care about and help those involved in them. We can do this alone and together, guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit abiding in us.

Sister Helen CSC

Photo taken by Terrie Baker

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