

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Easter 5 (John 15.1-8)

Sunday 10 May 09

By John McLuckie

One of the novelties I am enjoying of life in London is the time I find I now have on my daily commute to read. At the moment, I'm nearing the end of the series of five novels that Patricia Highsmith wrote about her incomparable anti-hero, Tom Ripley. Now, any of you who know the Ripley novels or who have seen the excellent Anthony Minghella version of the Talented Mr Ripley may now start suspecting that I've been reading these because I harbour murderous thoughts towards my fellow commuters. I can assure you that this not the case. Or at least not usually... I'm much more attracted to the escapism of the variety of locations: the appeal of Berlin, French villages, Tangier or Rome is strong on a rainy morning on the District Line. If you're not familiar with the novels, Tom Ripley is a highly unusual character. He is sophisticated and charming, polite and attentive. He plays the harpsichord, tends his garden and paints. He also does dirty jobs for a fence, sells forged art, excels in fool-proof deceptions and commits murder without remorse, but only when it's really necessary. Ripley is a classically divided character, someone who is not at home with himself or in the world. He is dangerously disconnected from others and from his own conscience.

Now most of us never get anywhere near this level of disconnection, but Highsmith's achievement in her Ripley novels is to draw us into Ripley's world to the extent that we find ourselves almost rooting for him until we catch ourselves and realise that we've been snared. Although we don't inhabit Ripley's world, we do often experience the unsettling condition of being disconnected from what is most important to us, from what is most truly us. This can happen when the familiar securities of our life are troubled – our relationships, our jobs, our passions, our resources. And when we are disconnected in this way, our lives are not fruitful in the way we want them to be. Sometimes we can feel that we have loosened our connection to what truly roots us to all that is best about our lives. It's like a kind of spiritual homelessness.

I firmly believe that the Christian Gospel of Easter is about offering us ways to be reconnected to Life in order that we may grow up and flourish in the way that God wants us to. John's gospel offers us today a rich picture of how that happens. All the talk of 'abiding' that we heard in the gospel today is exactly about that reconnecting and the image of the vine and its branches is profoundly one of connectedness. But before looking at that vine image, I want to think a little more about that notion of 'abiding' because it is precisely the opposite of the rootless, homeless, unconnected life that I described in Tom Ripley. Do you remember the peculiar question that the first disciples ask of Jesus when they meet him right at the start of John's gospel? They ask him; 'Where are you living?'. This seems a most bizarre question, almost like a misplaced bit of small talk, but this is John's gospel, so we need to slow down our reading and ask what he's doing with the words he uses. The word 'living' is exactly the same word as the 'abiding' we have in today's gospel. In other words, the disciples are asking Jesus; 'Where do you locate your sense of rootedness? Who *are* you? What connects you to who you are? What is your abiding sense of self?'

Today's gospel offers a kind of response to that question. Jesus' sense of connectedness to the source of his life is a flow of mutuality with the Father

and with those around him. In other words, for life to flourish, to bear fruit, we must attend both to the quality of our inner, rooted, grounded self, and to the quality of the relationships we have with those around us. These dynamics are a constant flow, a rhythm of growing outwards and inwards. Like the sturdy vine growing down into the soil and extending its delicate branches around it, our lives consist entirely in these interactions. Practically speaking, this means that we must ensure that the pattern of our days and weeks gives us space both for nourishing our relationships with others and for the nourishment of our inner life. It pays for us to take stock from time to time of whether that pattern is fruitful for us, and I would invite you to take a few moments at some point this week to do that.

Jesus' image of the vine tells us of another very practical way in which we ensure that our lives are fruitful. He talks of a pruning, a stripping away of the things that draw essential nourishment away from where it is most needed. Those of you who are gardeners will know how essential this is. In terms of a fruitful, grounded, connected life, the pruning is an evaluation of the things that are diverting energy and sustenance from where it is most needed. Sometimes this will mean that we need to make hard decisions about activities or investments of our time and energy. Sometimes it will be just as important to prune those thoughts, attitudes and grievances that draw energy and nourishment from our inner life or from our relationships with others.

If all of this is true for us as individuals in our relationships with others, it is also true for communities and nations. This is Christian Aid Week and is, therefore, an opportunity for us to consider how the connectedness of peoples and nations needs to be pruned and tended in order for life to flourish and be fruitful for all. As in all human interaction, the wellbeing of one depends on the wellbeing of all. Our lives are as surely connected as the branches of the vine. So where there is an imbalance between the wealth of nations, there is an imbalance in the whole. It then becomes appropriate to talk of pruning. What must give way in order for there to be fruitfulness in all the branches of the vine? What economic advantage must we forego in order to restore balance among the branches of the one vine? And this is not just a matter of economics, it's a matter of faith. As we heard in the first letter of John, 'if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us.' And what is love, if not the abiding expression of mutuality?

So I invite you to take a little time this week to learn more about how the interconnections work in our world and to consider how, in love, you might respond.