

## Sunday 17 May 2009: Sixth Sunday of Easter

Love one another as I have loved you

**Readings: Acts 10.44-end; John 15.9-17**

In his address at the wedding that took place here yesterday Nick, our vicar, told the couple that love “was about being human at its best.” He said that Africans use the word “Ubuntu” to express a sense of connectedness and belonging to one another – as the essence of being human. Desmond Tutu says that we have no single word in English for ubuntu – the word describes the essential quality of community we all lament having lost. Ubuntu is a word which embraces hospitality, caring about others, being able to go the extra mile for the sake of others. Tutu says “We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably with yours.”

Personally I don't think ubuntu is lost in London, even in this culture, this spirit just needs a chance to come out of hiding. If you don't believe me, then you must have missed the wedding yesterday – where this church became meeting place for Costa Rica, America, Kenya, the congregation of St Martin-in-the Fields and the tourists of the world walking past snapping photos. Ubuntu in the centre of London. Simon, otherwise known as Ziggy Wooldridge, who was baptised as an infant in this church, yesterday was married here to Vivian Castro, a Costa Rican from USA. As I turned to see Vivian walking up the aisle I also saw everyone: choir, multi-national congregation, numerous photographers and bridesmaids bursting with what could only be described as sheer joy. It was totally infectious. Ruth Wooldridge, Ziggy's mother, afterwards said the whole church just seemed to be flooded with love. A sacrament, we are told is an outward sign of invisible grace. Well here the invisible grace was not at all invisible – it shone out for all to see.

This sense of community is not just about coming together for a celebration but uniting around values that really matter. Ziggy has been helping coordinate land mine clearance in Iraq and Somalia and Mike Wooldridge in his speech described how he had been able to meet up with Ziggy in Nairobi when he had gone to report on the post election violence. It was then that he had seen his son's friendship developing with Vivian who was working in Kenya; after the brutality of the conflict this love seemed such a wonderful thing. Two people prepared to live outside their comfort zone, caring for humanity and for one another, whose love he felt would not be easily defeated. He linked this with our church, a church which sends out and welcomes back home and sends out again. Today's ubuntu has a wider reach – not just a kinship group but an extended family which has, at its best, the ability to care beyond cultural or national boundaries and of which the poorest of our world can become part. Outside the church yesterday the shouts of the Palestinian rally could be heard reminding us of our wider modern ubuntu and further down in Whitehall the cries of the Tamil Sri Lankans crying for their people. We don't just belong to the people of our own blood in this city – the family has widened! As Desmond Tutu writes “The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms – we must seek to work for the common good because our humanity comes into its own in belonging.”

At yesterday's wedding service words by the African writer Ben Okri were read. They seemed to be saying something very close to today's Gospel – like a command to love. Ben Okri writes to his friend:

Fear not but be full of light and love  
Never forget that love requires that you be  
The greatest person you are capable of being  
Self generating and strong and gentle  
Love demands the best in us  
In time to overcome the worst  
and lowest in our souls.  
Love the world wisely.

Jesus says in today's Gospel "this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you; abide in my love."

Christ's words open up to us the means to that love – not as something we strive to possess but something which is given to us as gift – not something we invent from scratch each time but something which is already within us. How often, as Harry Williams perceptively pointed out, we rewrite St Paul's great chapter about love:

Love tries to suffer long  
Love tries to be kind  
Love tries not to envy  
Love tries to bear all things, tries to endure all things...

It sounds a real uphill struggle. Love does not *try*, says Williams – it is because God is. God is love. Love doesn't begin with the trying; it is love which makes the trying possible. The miracle of love is that we are abiding in it perhaps without realising.

In today's reading Christ extends the image of the vineyard and its fruit. The theme of the vineyard recurs throughout the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures the vineyard is a familiar symbol for a bride. Isaiah in chapter five sings the song of this vineyard bride "Let me sing for my beloved, a love song for his vineyard on a very fertile hill." But the mood of the song soon changes. The vineyard becomes a sadness and a shame. It yields only wild sour grapes and now the vineyard is plundered, its walls broken down, the fertile land has become a wasteland. It becomes clear to us that the bride is Israel and the marriage is with God. God formed a covenant with Israel. It was a sign of relationship and trust. It was a sign of reciprocal love. But Israel has answered God with unfaithfulness – the special relationship has been abandoned. The love song has turned sour and become the story of infidelity. In the New Testament, this theme of the vineyard is taken up. In Christ's parable in Mark's Gospel Israel is represented by the tenants of the vineyard whose owner has gone on a journey and whose owner sends his servants to request a share of the fruits of the vineyard. The servants are beaten and rejected by the tenants and even killed. The landowner finally sends his own son. They will respect him, he mistakenly believes, but no, the son too is killed. The parable seems to be speaking of the past treatment of the prophets, it seems to be speaking of Christ's own forthcoming death but it also seems to be speaking of our own future, where we get rid of God for we no longer need him or pay him any respect. It speaks of a world where greed has usurped the fruits of the vineyard – a world where each is out for themselves, their own profit, their own gain, tax concession, moat, chandelier, mortgage, irrespective of honesty and without recourse to the owner of the vineyard. It is the opposite of ubuntu, it is the enrichment of the individual at the expense of the common good, dehumanising and dividing because it diminishes the relationship with the other.

It is in this context of division that today's reading says to us "I am the vine and you are the branches." What Christ is saying is overwhelming. He is saying that God is no longer the

absent landlord. Not even the one who sends messengers calling for justice. No, he is saying that God himself is the one who has let himself be planted in the earth, down here in the very vineyard – planted here and now, and that our life depends on his. Christ has become the incarnate one in the world, but more than that: “I am the Vine and you are the branches.” We are actually part of that vine, part of God’s life in us. This is an incredible image of unity.

I began by talking about a marriage where two become one without losing anything of the self, rather a unity by which each partner is enhanced and enhances the other. We belong to one another and to God and by that very belonging we are fed and nourished and pass on that nourishment. In this belonging we bear fruit. Cut off from one another and from the vine we can no longer abide in God’s love. We wither and we die, or we usurp the life of others. This teaching is as relevant for today as it was 2000 years ago, perhaps even more so. More than ever before we have become aware of how mutually interdependent our world is – that consumer needs in the western world have consequences in every nation, our carbon emissions have consequences in islands flooded in the South Pacific, our designer furniture can mean plundered rain forests, our cheap clothes can mean cheap labour, that wealth of gold or diamonds can mean death in the Congo, drug addiction in London has a relationship to war in Afghanistan, that rogue trading, hedge funds and a failing bank in America or UK can affect the world – a sneeze in Mexico will be felt in Dulwich. We too are involved and implicated in a struggle for life and death, whether it be on the Pakistani border or in Sri Lanka or Zimbabwe. Conversely that vine also means we can make a life-giving difference to our world. For example, here in this church this morning, and here is the plug, you can, through Christian Aid, support those in need in parts of the world we never even knew existed before. You can make a difference to a child’s chance of education, or a village’s access to water or sanitation, or to someone dying of HIV/AIDS or from Malaria: just by putting money or a cheque in the red envelope in front of you. Out there on the street you can build relationships with practically every nation of the world. Even in this church this morning this incredible vine of God’s relationship is bringing together such a rich mix of humanity – look around you now and pray for your neighbours in this church this morning.

Ubuntu is not something for Africa; it means belonging to the vine and bearing fruit that will last here and now. It means loving as Christ has loved us – a marriage we can all celebrate.