

Reading: John 15:1-8

Again, this week Jesus is trying to get across to his audience the deep connection between him and us. Last week he used the image of the good shepherd, this week it's the grapevine. His audience would have got it, because like the good shepherd they were very familiar with a grapevine and how it needs to remain connected with the vine.

The grapevine is an image of community. By staying connected to each other we are ultimately connecting ourselves to Jesus. Through the sacraments and simply being together we grow and flourish and bear the fruits of the spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

We need the encouragement of other Christians. This is why we gather. We can't do it on our own. We need the building up of the sacraments. J B Philips wrote: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.". But for modern people this image of connectedness and community is a real challenge. Almost daily I meet people who believe in God but find staying in community at church just too hard. I can find God on the golf course they say to me. Of course, God is on the golf course or in the garden or at the sports club or at the mall. In fact, I heard of one vicar who was fed up going to church every Sunday so decided to call in sick and sneak to the golf course for a round of golf which he loved. "God," he said, "I know I shouldn't be here but give me a good round anyway." Talk about a good round. The first round was a perfect hole in one and the second and the third and so it went on. Unbelievable swing, magic line, perfect power down the green. Being a vicar and all, he thanks God at the end of the round "You are so good to me," said the priest, "even when I don't turn up for my job you bless me." "That's right," said God "but I get the last laugh. Who are you going to tell?!"

Modern people find community difficult. But it is in community when we do not get our own way that we are taught about our powerful egos. Worshiping with people we find difficult to like, teaches us about love. Trying to get consensus around decision making and the constant need for funding teaches us a generous spirit. We learn and we practice the fruits of the Spirit with others. All the fruits need to rub up against other people to grow love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The vicar heard one day about a rogue parishioner who had announced that he was no longer coming to church. It was winter and when he visited, she had the fire going. After the welcoming pleasantries she reached down in silence and pulled a bright red coal from the fire. And placed it with the things on the hearth. They sat in silence and watched as it went from red hot to purple and eventually to ashen gray. "See you Sunday," the parishioner said. He got the point. The point was without being a part of the community we quickly lose our zeal; we quickly burn out and grow cold in our faith.

To be sure, staying connected to the vine, to the body of Christ, costs us. It costs us time, energy, and money. It's easier to go it alone, after all there is always something to not like about other people. But community is the way we stay connected to Jesus, it's the way we receive the life-giving joy of the sacrament. It's the way we hear others' prayers, it's the way we learn to love and value people we would never normally mix with.

I was reflecting on how church is a diverse community. And how it calls us to greater involvement with people we would normally never see. Last Sunday I went from the 8am here to St Luke's at 9:30am, then to chair the 11:30am AGM in Hornby, to the Mandarin service at 2pm and finally on to the Riccarton Rotary service at 5pm. Each was a very different group, across every age, income, different races, even languages. If you think we aren't different from the Hornby Parish, you haven't been to the Hornby Parish! Jesus calls us to connect with him through his visible body, the church, in ways we would never do on our own.

There is no other organization that calls together such a mixed bunch and the only criterion for joining is that you be human.

Henri Nouwen wrote the following about community: *"Nothing is sweet or easy about community. Community is a fellowship of people who do not hide their joys and sorrows but make them visible to each other as a gesture of hope ... In community we say: "Life is full of gains and losses, joys and sorrows, ups and downs - but we do not have to live it alone. We want to drink our cup together and thus celebrate the truth that the wounds of our individual lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, become sources of healing when we live them as part of a fellowship of mutual care."*

*Community is like a large mosaic. Each little piece seems so insignificant. One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold. Some look precious, others ordinary. Some look valuable, others worthless. Some look gaudy, others delicate. We can do little with them as individual stones except compare them and judge their beauty and value. When, however, all these little stones are brought together in one big mosaic, portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them? If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete. Together in the one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That's community, a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world."*

Jesus is wanting us to know the closeness we have to him. The old-fashioned word is abiding. We in him and he in us. We might find the image of the vine helpful or the image of the mosaic, or the jigsaw or the good shepherd. But whatever image we use, in community we find God visible, and we can't do this *making visible* without each other.

Thanks be to God!