

### **1. In our reading from Acts, today, we hear of a very dynamic and passionate Philip**

This is not the Philip of the 12 apostles in the gospels. It is a different Philip. Today's Philip was one of 7 men appointed by the 12 apostles as the early church was growing. The apostles were becoming increasingly stretched and so important work was getting missed. The particular incident was that caring for the vulnerable widows in the wider community - by provision of food – was not adequate. So these 7 - Philip was among them – were appointed to action this important practical task. He must be someone who gets things done!

Today, we hear of him talking to an Ethiopian court official. It's all pretty full on! Philip arrives in a whirlwind! Acts 8.26-27:

***'Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.'***

Then we read the Spirit tells him to introduce himself to this Ethiopian stranger. Then after this man is baptised, Philip is rushed off again elsewhere! We get the sense Philip is a busy activist!

### **2. We are all called to be activists of some sort (although what this activism will look like will vary through our stages of life!). But we must all remain rooted in God if we are to be truly fruitful activists i.e. if our activism is to bear good fruit.**

The monks speak of a life of 'Contemplation and Action' because the truth is we need both. One without the other and our lives are shrivelled. In particular, if we are activist but our activity is not coming from a place of rootedness, there are risks:

- We can start feeling panicked/pressured/anxious: Am I good enough? What can I do? Can I make (enough of) a difference? Is it really worth it?
- We might start full of energy / passion – but end up exhausted and despondent
- We can start to feel arrogant: I am 'above' or 'wiser' than the world around me; the world exists for me to exercise my activism; why isn't everyone else responding too?

Jesus' words in our gospel today speak right into this need to be rooted.

### **3. Jesus' words remind us: the source of our well-being and life, is him (v4):**

***'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.'***

If we truly can start to live that, the risks I just mentioned are addressed head on:

- Do we feel anxious/pressured? Rest in him; our starting point is him; we are not ultimately responsible
- Did we start full of energy but end up exhausted / despondent? Rest in him, you can do no more than what God is able to do through you
- Do we feel arrogant? Rest in him; remember who is the source of our 'fruiting'!

As an example: one thing I struggle with is how to manage money: do we have enough? should we save more? should we give away more? But in reflecting on this image, I have been helped: I am only a steward of our money which ultimately is God's (it's not mine) and my role is simply to 'remain in him.'

But there is more in this image of the vine and the branches that we can learn from.

#### 4. Another lesson is: you cannot be connected to God and not to each other!

We live in an individualistic world in our western culture. And much that we might read in the media on spirituality is often about finding our own fulfilment, our own peace, our own way of connecting with God and the spiritual life. 'Each to their own' could be a western mantra!

I am not saying we should not take responsibility for our own well-being. But what this image reminds us is that we will never find our own well-being privately, in our own hermetically sealed existence! Jesus is saying: we are branches (v.5): ***'I am the vine, you are the branches.'***

Jean Vanier founded the l'Arche communities, communities where those with and without intellectual disabilities, share living experiences and are enriched by each other's vision of the world. Sadly, it has come to light since his death that Jean Vanier was abusive toward a number of non-disabled women. But he did write 'Community and Growth' which I still feel remains an important book in modern thinking on community life. In 'Community and Growth', he wrote:

***'We shouldn't seek the ideal community. It is a question of loving those whom God has set beside us today. They are signs of God. We might have chosen different people, people who were more cheerful and intelligent. But these are the ones God has given us, the ones God has chosen for us. It is with them that we are called to create unity and live a covenant.'***

We can be tempted to constantly look for a better community, or even retreat from community altogether.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers were a movement in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the Middle East, of Christians going out to live in the wilderness areas: the first monastics. They were known as the White Martyrs. The Red Martyrs were those who lost their lives for their faith due to persecution. But in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity became the accepted religion of the Roman Empire: no more persecution! And some Christians became frustrated that all of a sudden, Christianity was becoming 'too easy and comfortable' and wanted to witness to what they thought Christian faith was really about. In their collected stories, there is this:

***A brother asked, 'I have found a place where my peace is not disturbed by the brethren; do you advise me to live there?' Abba Poemen [Abba was their title: Father] replied, 'The place for you is where you will not harm the brothers.'***

Think about that! That is profound!

#### 5. We do need to discern our 'connection' wisely!

In the modern world, we have wonderful communication technology. It has brought numerous blessings: keeping in touch with distant loved ones, for example. But we all know of the danger of too much connection: many people are almost addicted to their mobile phone messages, and seem unable to break away from what starts to feel like a shackle.

We need to discern our level of connection wisely. But Jesus is telling us: we do need connection – through him to God, and with others. In fact we will only shrivel and die without that connection. And that connection with others – as our second New Testament lesson from John's first letter also reminds us – is the means by which we come to know God (1 John 4.20):

***'Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.'***