
Closing the Book

1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 6, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Jesus hasn't got long left with his disciples. So he gathers them round for one last conversation. And you feel the disciples' growing sense of panic, because suddenly that wondrous abundance that they'd always felt around Jesus is being displaced by a terrifying sense of scarcity that they don't have him for much longer. And the disciples are saying, "Show us more! You haven't told us enough!" But at the same time Jesus is saying, "I've shown you all there is. To say or do more would simply be showing you more of what you've already felt and seen." It's as if Jesus has reached into his collection of 1980s soul albums, and started singing, "If you don't know me by now, you will never, never, never know me..." (to which the only appropriate response from the disciples would, of course, be "oooooooooh, oooooh oooooh oooooh oooooh oooooh").

What Jesus does is to give them one last "I am" saying. He's given six already – including "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the good shepherd," and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" – and now he's going to make it the perfect seven. He says, "I am the true vine." Think about the many layers of significance in this phrase. Israel thought of itself as a vine, or a vineyard. Jesus is saying, "I am the true Israel, the chosen of God, through whom all the nations will find a blessing." Jesus says, "I am the trunk, the core, the epicenter of everything God has always been doing." Remember it all started with a tree in a garden? Humanity's failure to honor that tree symbolized humanity's failure to put God in the middle of all things and let God be the source of abundant life. Jesus says, "I am the heart of it all. I am the original source of life. I am God's renewal of the earth through Israel." And now, here we are, the night before Jesus is hung on the cross, and Jesus is describing himself as a tree. Surely no coincidence there, you'd think. Jesus is saying, "This tree is what I am – I am God's arms stretched abroad to restore Israel, humanity, and all creation to life, and to turn the water of life into the wine of eternal life. My Father is pruning me, curtailing my life, to give the fruit of abundant life to the world."

And the word Jesus uses no less than eight times in four short verses is, "abide." It's also used six times in four verses in today's epistle from the First Letter of John. Abide in me. Abide in me the way I abide in the Father. In other words, stay connected to the vine, stay with these things. If you want a shorthand for who I am, says Jesus, remember the vine. Because the root of the vine is Israel, the branches of the vine are the church, the grapes of the vine are abundant life, the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands is the cup of the Eucharist, the transformation of earthy water into heavenly wine is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the trunk of the vine is Jesus. It's all here. Stay close to the vine, says Jesus. If you don't know me in the vine... you will never, never, never know me.... Abide with me in the vine; and you will be at the heart of it all.

The 2005 movie *The Notebook* portrays an old man driving to a care home to see a woman who lives there. In flashback we discover the story of an unlikely romance. Noah's a country boy. Allie's from the city. Noah doesn't have two dimes to rub together. Allie's dad has more money than God. It's the South in the 1940s. There's no way old wealth is going to be allowed to marry white trash. Allie's mother knows it can only end with her daughter heartbroken or pregnant. So Allie's spirited north to another world, to college in New York, where in time she meets just the right young man and becomes engaged. Noah never gets over the summer romance. Instead he puts his heart and soul into restoring the dilapidated house where he and Allie first embraced all those years before. While trying on her wedding dress, Allie reads about Noah's restoration enterprise in the local newspaper. Out of curiosity she drives out to see the old familiar house. It's like putting a match to a powder keg. The romance reignites within moments of Noah and Allie setting eyes on each other again. It's time for Allie to choose. Allie faces a choice that will define her life.

And at this point we understand who the old man driving to the care home was. And we realize what he was driving there to do. He's Noah, 60 years later. Except now he goes by another name. An interesting name. He goes by the name Duke. And he's carrying in his hand a notebook. It turns out it's a notebook written by Allie at a point in her life when she'd realized the bindweed of Alzheimer's was beginning to wrap itself around her brain. And we perceive what the story is really about. Every day Duke comes to the care home to read the story back to her. When he gets to the defining moment in the story, the moment when it's time for Allie to choose, Duke stops reading, and, like a good storyteller, lets the listener do the work. He turns to Allie, and says, "Which one did she choose?" For an exquisite moment, present and past coalesce, and Allie, in a flash of perception, comes to her senses, then and now. In that moment, she knows who she is.

And in that same moment, I know who I am. In this very moment, I know who I am. I'm telling you the story of a woman who came to her senses when she was told the story in the right way. And it's an old story. But it feels new. Maybe it really is new. Because, don't you see, that's what I do. I'm a preacher. That's what a preacher does. A preacher learns the song in your heart and sings it back to you when you forget how it goes. A preacher learns the song in God's heart and sings it to you, in rhythm, in classical, in blues, in soul, in rock, and sometimes even in roll. A preacher comes to you when you're confused, when you're on your knees, when you're bewildered, when you're hard of hearing, when you're in a faraway land of fairies or in a dungeon of defeated desire; a preacher comes to you and tells you the story again, until you realize that the one in the story, left with a choice, is you.

God's like Noah, preparing a place for you, crazy with love for you, abiding with you even when you're dallying with Southern society and dominated by your family's blinkered notions of your welfare; and you're like Allie, forgetful of your soul, suppressing your sadness, pretending you're acting for the best. And God sings to you, be you 9 or 19 or 49 or 99, "If you don't know me by now, you will never, never, never know me..."; and the preacher says, "Allie, which one did you choose?" And your eyes fill with tears, and you say, "God. I chose God. I chose God then. And I choose God now." And you come to your senses, and come face to face with God, and whether you're experiencing Alzheimer's, or depression, or bereavement, or despair, or loneliness, or failure, or fear, you come alive like never before, and you stretch out your hand to your precious Lord and ask him to lead you home, and say those simple, joyful, words: "Abide with me."

I stand before you today with only one thing to say, the words my mother taught me to say when it was time to say goodbye (whether it was true or not), "Thank you for having me. I've had a lovely time." But this time, it *is* true. Thank you. Thank you because, after seven precious years of abiding with you, seven years of sharing a story and seeing it come alive and bring people alive, seven years of dear old Duke, I realize that I'm not Noah. I'm not the one who's been telling the story. I'm Allie.

I'm Allie, the one who half-remembers the defining choice of her life, the one who lapses into forgetfulness, the one who's surrounded by love but still finds a way to fall into fear. And you – you, my colleagues on faculty and staff, you, Chapel congregation with a big C and a little c, you, PathWays students and Public Policy students, you, divinity students and Anglican Episcopal students and doctoral students, you, attenders at vigils and families of homicide victims, you, Chapel Choir and Vespers Ensemble, you, Friends and Alums and Administrators and Trustees, you, watchers of webcasts and emailers from New Zealand and the Outer Hebrides and Vancouver and Taiwan, you, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, you, friends in Durham Public Schools and businesses and the police and non-profits and NCCU and partner churches, you, who sleep outside and eat in the soup kitchen, you, in whom I've met *eruditio* and in whom I've met *religio* – you, you guys, you'uns, y'all, all y'all – you are Noah. Except in the story Duke and Noah are the same person. You have been Duke for me, and today I realize you've been Noah all along.

You've sung to me the song in God's heart. And today I'm like the disciples at the last supper, feeling that the glorious abundance of these last seven years together is about to be displaced by the terrifying scarcity of

parting, and wanting to say, "It's not enough! Why can't there be more?" and I feel you singing, "If you don't know us by now, you will never, never, never know us...."

Together we've seen branches grow and bear fruit. Together we've experienced the abundance of the Father's harvest. Together we've known times of pruning, and the grief and anger and horror and bewilderment of losing a branch and all the fruit we believed could have come from it. Together we've seen earth turn into grapes, the water of life turn into the wine of eternal life. Together we've said to Jesus, "Abide with us." And, d'you know what? I do believe he has.

I've been with you as a preacher. And I've discovered you know the song in God's heart better than I do, and you've been singing it to me these last seven years. But there's something more important, more basic, more fundamental than being a preacher. And that's being a disciple. And of all the people who might be Duke, or shall we say Noah, in your life, and tell you the story in such a way that brings you to your senses, the most likely of all is a child. I want now to close the notebook by telling you about a day one preacher discovered what the vine really is, and what it means to abide in Jesus, through the wisdom of a child.

I'm going to tell you about a family I know very well and you know very well. The children are quite young, not yet ten years old. They've attended a well-known and very large church for most of their lives. The children's father's a well-known preacher. But the two children aren't at all impressed by that. They know what really matters. When they see the procession of choir and bible and servers and lectors and clergy walk forward during the opening hymn, the children are captivated by the one thing that really matters, the one thing that encapsulates the vine in all its life-giving abundance and transforming power and pruning grief. And that one thing is the cross. One of the children habitually takes a small cross out of her worship bag and waves it proudly as the choir and bible and clergy walk by. One day, while everyone else was singing the processional hymn, her brother decided right now was the time to ask their mother for the answers to life's most important questions.

"What does it take to carry the cross, Mommy?"

"You have to be strong, son, because it's heavy, and you have to carry it a long way; but most people find that it gets lighter, because Jesus promised to bear the burden with us."

"Who gets to carry the cross, Mommy?"

"It's often a member of the choir, son, because to be in the choir you have to be incredibly strong; but really, anyone can be invited to do it."

"Might I carry the cross one day, Mommy?"

"I hope so, son. I hope you'll carry the cross every day of your life."

"Will *Daddy* ever get to carry the cross?"

"Maybe he will, son. Maybe, one day, he will."

I came here to be your preacher. And you have made me a disciple. Thank you.