

Seeing into the life of things through the true vine – Homily for Easter V

John 15:1-18

I have learned

*To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
...I have felt*

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.*

During this year of lockdowns when the world has been full of sad music, and the encounter with nature one of the steady sources of solace for many, I have often turned to these words written by William Wordsworth in his poem 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.' In them Wordsworth conjures forth with simple elegance the

vital energy coursing through nature and the human soul, coaxing heart and mind to a sense of transcendence breaking out from within our world.

I particularly like that in this and many of his poems, Wordsworth rarely jumps straight into God talk, preferring to hint at things divine through things natural and human. For there is a way of rushing into the language of the divine that overlooks what is not God. Wordsworth's reluctance to do this has often led him to be dismissed by those of an orthodox religious persuasion. Not only does this do Wordsworth a disservice but it suggests his vision is foreign to Christianity.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Simply put, it is central to our faith that God creates all things. This means that all things exist by sharing in God's own being which is truly given away so that each creature shows forth the divine gift of being in its own dignity and mystery. It also means that each thing is intimately connected to everything else in the intricate web of existence that points beyond itself to God.

This radical interconnectedness is something we have come to appreciate in our own time. The global economy, technology, the internet allow us to be more present in more people's lives than ever before. We are aware that the ecosystems which support all life are intricately woven together in a delicate balance threatened by human

pollution. And, in the current pandemic, we have witnessed how the health of any of us depends on the health of all of us. Saying this, we are painfully aware of how the interconnectedness of our world is threatened or thwarted. Wealth is not equitably distributed. Health belongs to the rich rather than the poor. The rights of women, black people, the disabled, gay and transgender people, and so many others are daily denied on pain of death.

It is against this background that we can hear today's Gospel. Jesus says to his disciples: *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

Jesus speaks here in a poetic register that would make Wordsworth gasp. The image evokes the living relationship between Jesus and his disciples. It speaks of just how intimately Christ dwells in his disciple and their radical dependence on Christ. But this is no life of servitude. As branches of the true vine, the disciples receive the energy and freedom of the divine life, calling them into the fullness of who they are to bring forth the choicest fruit of all: love.

It would go against all that God is and does to interpret Jesus' image of the vine and branches as concerning only those who call themselves Christians. Rather, precisely because everything is interconnected in God, when God dwells amongst us as one of us in Jesus, then the whole fibre of existence is shot through with the vital sap of the divine

life. Through his overcoming the powers of sin and destruction by his self-giving love in death and rising to new life, Jesus recalls all things to their dignity as verdant shoots of the tree of life.

This understanding of Jesus as the true vine helps to clarify what it means for us to abide in him. It is not simply that we are to live in openness to God in faith. It is not only that we are to remain steadfast in prayer, reading Scripture, receiving the Sacraments, and sharing the Gospel with others. It is also these should all flow from and lead us ever more deeply into the living connection between all things. We should live in a way that celebrates this connection, particularly with our fellow human beings. This is the way of love that bears the fruit of love. Or as Wordsworth puts it, this is 'to receive deeply the lesson deep of love.' And, indeed, it is telling that Wordsworth's celebration of nature sits alongside his championing of the poor and human liberty over oppression.

As branches we must, says Jesus, be pruned to yield the fruit of love. Jesus presses home how this radical interconnection requires a discipline of dying and rising again in love's purifying fire, and overcoming all in us that is selfish. Jesus' harsh words about branches being thrown in the fire is no mere arbitrary condemnation. This is what we do to ourselves when we hoard all that is good about our connection to others for ourselves. We cut ourselves off from the source of life itself.

Jesus ends his poetic commentary on the true vine with a reference to prayer, our heart's attentive openness to God. Prayer is crucial to fostering our connection to all things in God. Prayer enables us, as Wordsworth puts it in Tintern Abbey, 'to become a living soul: ... with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We see into the life of things.' It is by prayer that we abide in Jesus's own abiding in the Father through the Spirit. It is by prayer that we allow the divine energy, the words of life, flowing through all things, to flow in us, to become our words of life, poetry, worship, love.

It is by abiding in Jesus' poetry and prayer that we are enabled to bear the fruit of love that is the mark of God's true vine. The love that mends the tears our existence; that sets alight our moral being; that allows the energy of the Holy Spirit to branch out from our hearts into the creative task of transforming our technological, economic, and social existence. Love is the anchor of our purest thoughts that sing of the beauty of all things with a human freedom and responsibility become fully alive. This is to bear much fruit, to be Christ's disciples to the glory of the Father.