

St Columba 11th May 2009
Easter 5 and Mother's Day

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1 John 4:7-12, 17-21
John 15:1-8

Connectedness

'God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.' Says the writer of the first letter of John.

Mother's Day brings with it notions of love...especially if you have small children who want to find ways to celebrate their Mother along with the rest society – they make cards and tea and toast and try their very best to 'be really good'. As we grow older Mother's Day often means we try to avoid getting caught in the 'consumer persuasion machine' that suggests we should buy things...toasters and day-spa vouchers...and flowers. Love, on Mother's Day in western society is – if we are not careful - about doing things we would not usually do and buying things as ways of expressing our love and our appreciation for love received.

Both this morning's readings are connected to the idea of 'love'.

I want to invite you to consider with me, the Gospel reading for this morning with the image of vine and vine-grower that it presents. This metaphor was used in ancient Israel to identify the relationship of the emerging Israelite people to their God. Just as the strong woody runners of a grape vine holds together the bunches of fruit and the

leaves, in the same way their God held the people together in all their differences. They were one people held together under God's patronage. It was a solidarity image: people and God together – God providing the goodwill and all that was required to sustain life, (that was the role of the patron in Israelite society at the time, and still is in some cultures today) and the people in their turn honoured God by the way they lived and treated each other.

Social survival in ancient Israel depended on the good will of the patron - the one with the power to hold all together - and the 'right and honourable' response of the people. The Mana of God was enhanced when the people behaved well and everyone flourished: this was the fruit.

So when Jesus takes up this image of social cohesion and life-giving power and calls himself the vine, and God the vine-grower he is claiming an image that has held the people together for generations. He does not search for a new image but claims and redefines an existing one to talk about himself and the way of discipleship that he is offering – the way that will bring new life to the people who commit to living in ways that bring justice and healing, ways that hold the people together in love – connects all the parts

Being held together in love, knowing we are connected to one another and connected to the life-giving energy of God that infuse all life and energy in the world as we know it, is a basic way of understanding spirituality. It is in stilling ourselves enough to feel this sense of being in connection with all other beings, and with the land that supports

and sustains us, that we experience spirituality. This spirituality then helps us to care for all our human community and our land; that is, for the whole environment that sustains us - both the social and the physical environment. When such care for people and elements beyond ourselves is powerful enough to shape the way we live and make our decisions, then we call it 'love'. This is the love that Jesus and the early writers were pointing us toward when they proclaim 'God is love'. They point toward a love that holds all together as a vine hold its various parts together sustaining life by drawing nutrients from the earth and energy from the sun so that abundant fruit results.

'Whenua' is the word in Maori that speaks of land and brings forward images of the sustaining and life-giving energy of the land to which human communities belong...and not the other way round! The same word is used for the umbilicus that before birth connected us to our mothers and sustained us with food and blood as we grew into viable human-beings. Again, it is a word that reminds us of connectedness: Connectedness to the land and connectedness to the life-giving power of our Mothers.

It is always a mystery to me why it is we are reluctant to use the life giving and loving image of 'Mother' when we speak of God. We seem still to prefer the almighty, power, protector image of King and Father that emerged out of ancient times of war and struggle! In times such as ours, where there is fear and suspicion of those who are not like us, and great anxiety about our ability to sustain life, I can't help but think that the life-giving and loving mother- connected images would be more helpful and encouraging.

Mother-God is an image with deeper roots in our tradition than we realise and which fits well with our contemporary concerns and priorities. Throughout the Bible is portrayed as compassionate and nurturing and concerned to forgive and set back upon their feet those who stumble, these are all mothering connected images.

So it is a good thing to focus for a while on someone who birthed us, and who, whether male or female 'mothered us, nurturing us in our early years, and cared about us.

All good 'mothering' challenges and chastises as well as affirms and encourages. These are the ways we learn to be positive members of our communities and our society; they are the ways we learn the values of our culture and the appropriate and desirable ways to behave. So love is not about accepting all behaviours or all attitudes! If we are not fortunate enough to have the 'other' directed love such as we hope will be the love of a mother, it is so much more difficult for us to learn to be part of a community-a social system- in ways that are acceptable and contribute to the good of that whole system. We owe this kind of love to each other for all our sakes.

The Gospel vine reading reminds us that God removes branches that do not bear fruit – they are pruned so the whole vine can be more fruitful, healthier. In the same way, love sometimes needs to 'prune and clip' – to confront - so that persons and relationships are more fruitful, more healthy.

None of this is love we have been exploring refers us to the consumer buying frenzy that the media suggest we need to engage in, in order to show our love. Rather our love is shown in the way we behave toward those we are connected with; family, community, earth and water and all the creatures who inhabit this planet with us; in the way we express our concern for others and live our lives so they might also live.

Mother God, Mother Earth, and our own Mothers, these all provide us with experiences of connectedness that is sustained by love.

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and love is perfected in us...God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.'