**2nd May 2021; Easter 5**

Acts 8: 26-40; 1 John 4: 7-end;

John15:1-8

#### Ashdon 9.30 am

1. **Our sense of belonging**

I wonder if you can think of a time when you were glad to be home? This Bank Holiday, our youngest daughter is travelling with two young children from Manchester to Sussex to spend time with her sisters and their families. Given the difficulties of Bank Holiday travel, I imagine that they will be relieved at the end of their journey to return home on Monday evening. Although it hasn’t happened much in the past year, this is for many of us a common experience – after a holiday (even an enjoyable one) or perhaps more so after a stay in hospital, when we can once more sleep in our own bed. Put on the heating, or open the windows, kick off your shoes, and put the kettle on! You are home; there is a sense of belonging.

Some of you may have experienced living in a different country. Can you remember that first experience of feeling out of place? A strange language being spoken around you, people wearing different clothes, a sense of ‘not belonging’. When we went out to Pakistan, I expected this, and gradually this sense of being out of place lessened. And when we returned to Britain after several years away, which I thought of as ‘coming home’, I was surprised to find that although much here was familiar, there were also ways in which I no longer felt as ‘at home’ as I had done previously. I was shocked to see the range of goods in our shops, for example, and that there were so many women in the street, and the traffic was so orderly. Things I had not even noticed before. I saw what I thought was my own country with new eyes.

1. **Abide in me…**

The issue of where we are at home, and of where we feel we belong is central to our theme today. We did not hear the epistle reading set for today: it is from the first letter of John, chapter 4, verses 7 to the end, and I have printed some copies so that you can read it later along with our gospel reading. The word ‘abide’ appears 5 times in this epistle reading, and 8 times in the gospel that I just read.

Although somewhat old fashioned, this word ‘abide’ is a beautiful word, conveying that sense of being at home, of belonging, and of security. It goes beyond describing a place where you happen to be, or to live. It is the well spring of our identity. In our gospel reading, God invites us to abide in Him, to be rooted in Him, just as branches are attached to and rooted in a vine or other tree, drawing their nourishment and strength from the parent plant.

1. **… as I abide in you: implications**

Jesus also tells his disciples that God abides in them and makes his home with them: ‘Abide in me, **as I abide in you’**. The idea that God himself wants to be with us and make his home with us – with you and me – is astonishing, and very humbling. We believe that he desires this connection, and works tirelessly towards fostering this attachment.

And, if we abide in God, and God abides in us, there are implications. The first is that it affects how we behave. We are told that if we abide in Him we will bear much fruit. The analogy with a tree and its branches is a vivid one for us today just as it would have been for those in the time of Jesus. We all know that branches that are cut from the tree do not bear fruit. They need the nourishment of the tree to do this. What is this fruit? It is love for our brothers and sisters. That is made clear in the epistle reading. Being rooted in God is not about simply enjoying being at home with God. It affects how we live our lives and relate to other people – both locally and on a wider canvass. It affects our response to our neighbour as well as to the wider world. For example, we may look today at the terrible distress of the people of India and consider what implications such love might have for our aid programme.

The second implication is that we have vision, confidence and guidance through God’s Spirit within us. ‘Perfect love casts out fear’ writes John (I John 4: 18). This boldness and the guiding of the Holy Spirit can be seen in the reading that we heard from Acts. Philip followed the guidance of the Spirit to be in the right place to meet the Ethiopian eunuch – something that led to that man’s baptism, after which he went away rejoicing.

1. **Dual nationality**

The subject of Baptism is relevant to our thoughts here. For it is at our Baptism that we acknowledge that we are children of God. That we belong to God. We take on a new identity. I sometimes think of it like acquiring dual citizenship.

We have relatives – young people in their 20s, who have come here to live in Britain, and are hoping to gain the right to stay. In order to do so, they must pass a citizenship exam. If you have ever had occasion to look at the sort of questions that are included, you might realise (with me) that many native English people would not pass it. Do you know, for example, in which year women in Britain won the right to vote at the same age as men? I didn’t, nor did Alan. The answer, by the way, is 1928.

But our citizenship of heaven is not about what we know, or even about what our parents know. There is no citizenship test to pass. It is about accepting a promise. If we were baptised as adults, we may have accepted this for ourselves, but if we were too young to have a true sense of what it meant, it was a gift that was accepted on our behalf. It is lovely that here in Ashdon and also in Saffron Walden we now have babies due to be baptised this summer. Baptism is a gift of citizenship the true value of which many people do not at first realise. We do of course encourage parents and godparents to bring the child up to know their true home in God and in the Church, and to feel comfortable in it. But still it is a gift, freely given – not dependent on how many verses of scripture you can quote, or whether you know the difference between the Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds and when each were written.

As we grow in age and also in faith and church membership, we strengthen our familiarity with God our Father, and with all that Jesus shows us of Him. We join with others in our new family, and gradually this gives us a new identity alongside our human identities as child, brother, sister, parent, teacher or whatever. Increasingly we can feel at home, as if we belong. Being with God becomes a place where we can kick off our shoes and be honest – both with him and with ourselves. And when some of our other identities are stripped away, through death of a loved one, or other human losses, this remains. From God we came and to God we will return. This identity gradually informs our view of the world around us, sometimes even making what once seemed familiar now seem strange. This identity is constant, and even our own death cannot take it from us.

God’s table is where we are nourished, and accept afresh our rootedness in Him. We receive his strength and the re-assurance of his ongoing presence. We receive his gifts – to enrich, encourage and sustain us – to *‘bring our good desires to effect*’ as our Collect puts it; or, in the words of the post communion prayer, to *‘walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth and to share his risen life.’*  So may we today rejoice in our identity as children of God, and in the fact that, whatever life throws at us, He abides in us, and we in Him. **Amen**