

Sermon Easter 5 Year B 2024

One of the most interesting documents outside of the New Testament to have survived from the early church is a text called the *Didache*, or ‘The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.’ It is a very ancient document. It was possibly written earlier than some parts of the New Testament, namely the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, that is, probably in the last decade or so of the first century. And if written after, then no later than the early decades of the second century. Many of the Church Fathers knew of this document and quoted it in their own works. And if not regarded on the same level as Scripture, it was treated as authoritative and instructive, as it might be for us still. It might best be understood as a ‘manual’ for Christian living. It gives us a real insight into not just what early Christians believed, but how they lived, and how they expressed their faith.

The *Didache*, and other such manuals that have survived, were written for leaders and mentors in the Christian community for use with those who were about to become Christian, to impart basic Christian skills to them. These little manuals are often called ‘manuals of teaching.’ But if we look at some of these little manuals, we see they are better understood as ‘disciple-making’ guides. They aren’t so much concerned about doctrine or teaching as we might understand it (as in say, a creed or catechism). But these ancient manuals are concerned with imparting habits and skills so that a new believer would know how to *behave* as a Christian. So, they impart a set of ‘do’ and ‘do not’ rules. They suggest how and how often to pray, when and why to fast, how to administer the sacrament of baptism, when and how to assemble for the Eucharist. All terribly practical. To become a Christian was to start a life-long process of acquiring skills to be (in the language of today’s Gospel) grafted onto Christ’s living vine.

Importantly, an ancient document such as the *Didache* reveals a key insight of the early (indeed, the infant) church. Our ancient forbears in the faith recognised that to say we are Christian means to *live* as a Christian. If we want to grow in the faith, then we have to *practice* the faith. To hold to Christian beliefs has concrete consequence in behaviour. In short, being a Christian (as I have said before) ‘looks like’ something. *Becoming* a Christian means *being* a Christian. Ancient manuals such as the *Didache* are of course modelled on what is found in the New Testament itself. But they spell out the importance of training and building habits of behaviour.

In the language of the gospel today, the vine needs to be trained for it to go where we want it. To be a disciple of Jesus requires training in a particular way of living. It requires the acquisition of specific skills. It requires practice to know how to incorporate those skills into our lives. What the New Testament insists upon – and which the early Christians were convinced of – is that not any old kind of life will do... Not every kind of life is conducive or compatible with being a follower of Jesus! This can sometimes come as a shock to some believers! So drilled have we been on the importance of tolerance, inclusion, and diversity that we forget these are not actually Christian values! There are in fact some beliefs and some ways of being that we must be intolerant of and exclusive of! There is a vine – a True Vine – to be grafted onto. The life of faith is not a case of anything goes!!

Now, many people sort of approach faith - and the practice of the faith - as if it will just sort of 'happen.' And even many very sincere and well-meaning Christians have bought into the idea that the true measure of faith is something that is internal, subjective, and individual. What matters, we are told, is what we feel. And if we don't feel anything, or if it doesn't feel right, then we must move on to where we do feel something and where we do feel right.

The author of the Didache, and those of other ancient manuals for Christian living, could not have comprehended such a position. And nor would the author of the gospel of John, as seen in the gospel text placed before us today. Christian life is something that is practiced. It is something that is done. To follow Christ, for example, means that we develop some skills in prayer. Not perhaps the elaborate schemes for prayer that some teachers of prayer have developed over the centuries. But it does require knowing a basic set of Christian prayers, even to memorise some prayers. The Didache - perhaps just 20 or 30 years after it was recorded in the gospels - commends the Our Father to be prayed three times a day. The *skill* of praying requires the *practice* of prayer. The insight of the ancients is that the best practice is a *regular* practice. Certainly not when we feel like it, or when we remember to, or when things are going well in our lives. The best way to grow in prayer is to pray! The best way to become charitable is to be generous. The best way to understand the bible is to read it. The best way to grow in virtue is to be virtuous. It is not waiting for some magical set of conditions when you can finally get your life sorted. Faithful Christian living is committing to faithful Christian practice here and now, whatever our context.

The gospel placed before us today will have nothing of the casual, accidental approach to faith! The language of grafting and pruning and growth more than suggests our life of faith develops because it is *intentional*. The whole point of practicing the faith is that it strengthens our bond to Christ. Our relationship with Christ *will not* deepen if we approach it from a purely subjective, I'll-attend-to-it-when-I-feel-like-it way. And it won't deepen if we approach it in a casual, infrequent way. If our standard for belonging and believing is what we *feel*, then when things are difficult, and when we don't feel much is happening, then we will give up, get distracted, and go running after something shinier, and more attractive.

But it is the practice of faith that will sustain us when things are difficult and we don't feel very much. The point of practicing the faith is that it becomes part of our natural habitat. A habitat that has us deepen our love and service of Christ. This bond to Christ is so beautifully expressed in the gospel today as *abiding* in him. This is what our practice and disciplines of faith help us in: to abide in Christ. Now, 'abide' is one of the most important words in this entire gospel. It runs as a golden thread through this entire work. But in the text before us today, the use of this word reaches its peak in frequency. The rapid succession of the word 'abide' highlights the importance (and the quality) of the relationship between Christ and his church. And we see through the text today that without this relationship of abiding the church is powerless, wordless, prayerless, fruitless, and hopeless. This is what is at stake! This is why our practice is so important. Without it, the relationship flounders. There is nothing to bind us.

Our ancient forbears in the faith knew what being attached to the vine *looks like*. Christian faith looks like something. It has certain distinct markers because at its heart is a certain distinct relationship. Christian faith is attending to that relationship. And we attend to that relationship by practicing it, by 'doing' it. It means steady immersion in the life of prayer. You can find your own pattern and habit. The important thing is that it *is* a pattern and habit! Being attached to the vine - abiding in Christ - means immersion in the Scriptures, soaking in the truth of the Bible. It means engaging in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy because we do not seek to be grafted to Christ for our benefit only but to benefit the whole. And it means we must participate in the sacraments, in which Christ gives of himself, nourishes us and gives us life. Our relationship with Christ is possible. We *can* abide with him. But it will not happen by accident. It will happen when we *train* our lives according to him. Amen.