

25 July 21, St Brandon's.

Ephesians 3: 14-21, John 6: 1-21

Abundance

Abundance: I wonder what that word brings to mind? An abundant haul of medals to be won at the Olympics ? Abundant blooms on a favourite rose bush, or strawberries in the allotment?.

I wonder how many of us would link the word **abundant**, with God?

Today we'll consider **the abundance of God** –which all three of today's readings demonstrate. I'll focus on Paul's wonderful prayer in Ephesians 3, and I want to thank Amy Gooding, who prepared fabulous notes for this sermon but was unable to preach today. She'll do so on another occasion, and I'm indebted to her for her creative thoughts which I've unashamedly used for this sermon. The good bits are Amy's and I take responsibility for the rest! Here we go:

Psalms 85: a psalm of abundance. Our reading began:

All your works praise you, O Lord- all creation praises God. The word *all* appears no less than 9 times in the 5 verses we read. God's abundant faithfulness, compassion, mercy, righteousness and love are for *all* who call upon him and *all* who are oppressed, throughout *all* ages. Our abundant God is more faithful, compassionate, merciful, righteous and loving than we can ever grasp or understand. All these qualities were also embodied by Jesus.

In today's beautiful gospel reading we see him teach his disciples **a lesson in abundance**.

You know the story. A huge crowd, getting late, everyone tired and hungry.

Time to go home... then Jesus' question to Philip starts the lesson:

Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? Or:

Isn't it time you started getting tea ready?

Philip's answers predictably: *You must be joking. Even half my year's income wouldn't buy enough...*

By contrast the boy offers what he has- no thought of just eating it - he hands it over because, on this amazing afternoon with Jesus, anything seems possible. Andrew's less naïve: *'What are these among so many?'* Fair enough – from a fisherman used to judging how many mouths two fish and some bread can feed...

But **God's abundance** in Christ trumps caution, multiplies generosity, smashes through fear. This is love in action: if we want to know what God's love looks like, God's love looks like Jesus. Jesus full of compassion, who sends no one away, takes what is offered, however small and transforms it abundantly.

Jesus who feeds *all* the crowd, not just sufficiently but abundantly, with more than they could eat, more than they could ask for.

I wonder if Paul had this story in mind when he was praying for the church in Ephesus, the verses we heard as our first reading? Just as Jesus did in Galilee, God can do *abundantly more* than all we ask or imagine.

So let's turn to Ephesians 3, from v 14. This powerful and extravagant prayer, shows us a vision of the universal church, characterised by love, and completes Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus, which he began in Chapter 1.

He bows before the Father, let's note the reverence and humility of this, yet he comes confidently before God too, trusting in the one who gives his name to every family in earth and heaven, the one who has more power, mercy and love than anyone else.

Paul asks the Father, out of these glorious riches, that the Spirit's power may strengthen them and Christ may dwell in the hearts of the believers.

The three in one God will fill them with his **abundance**, through Christ's love and thus the Christians in Ephesus will be **rooted and grounded** in love: what a striking phrase that is.

The gardeners among us know that without strong roots and good soil, plants will never thrive. Likewise, Jesus' parable of the sower reminds us that plants in rocky ground won't develop strong roots, to access the soil which nourishes them.

Our friend John grows vegetables in a patch he's cultivated along a Scottish glen, gouged out millennia ago by a glacier which carried with it rocks and stones that then covered the valley floor. Before he grew anything, John needed to clear the ground, removing the pebbles and rocks into one corner of the patch, creating a mini mountain in one corner. It was a back-breaking process but without it, the carrots and cabbages, berries and beans would never have thrived in the abundance they do today.

In our lives too, there will be rocks of pain, anger, rejection, loss. Rocks which have shaped who we are, deep within, maybe so embedded that we no longer realise they are there. Closer to the surface we all have our smaller pebbles too, none the less obstructive when they block out the rich goodness of God's love – pebbles of hurt, pride, bitterness, prejudice, disappointment. And what is true for individuals is true for communities too, not least for local churches.

Many years ago we visited a church which was meeting in a vestry. When we inquired why, it turned out that there'd been a fundraising campaign for a new carpet for the main church, but when it arrived, not everyone liked the chosen colour, blamed those responsible and refused to use it....

Whilst we laugh, we know how easily small things can become immovable rocks of bitterness and division. But thanks be to God, the soft rain of the Holy Spirit *can* loosen the soil and bring things to the surface, and that the necessary hard graft of repentance and confession can dig out obstacles, allowing God's mercy and forgiveness to remove them. It takes time and effort, but God can do it with us and in us..

The last year or so has inevitably left debris in the wake of the ongoing pandemic. Yes, we have been blessed and protected by God along the way, but we do need to consider the rocks and pebbles too, the cost and consequences, and to ask God in his mercy and compassion to clear the ground of our lives, in order that we can be rooted ever more deeply in the good soil of Christ's love.

I told someone recently about the experience of locking the door of St Brandon's in March 2020 and putting up the sign to say the church was closed. I'd not fully recognised the pain of that moment and all it stood for, but I believe God began to heal that rock of pain within me. It's a pain many of you will have experienced too, echoing as it did the greater loss and trauma of the fire when the church was all but destroyed. Thanks be to God, as soon as we could unlock our door, the Wipe Down Team, inspired and energised by the Holy Spirit, sprang into action so that St Brandon's could remain open every single day since: I believe that has been hugely important to more people than we will ever know.

May we be rooted in Christ's love – for plants with deep roots, even when battered by storms, will survive and grow again. And may we be grounded in Christ's love too- so that we *grow fully and freely* into all God wants us to be. This is about space and dimensions, the breadth and length, height and depth of Christ's love as verse 18 puts it.

We visited Harlow Carr RHS garden – you may have been?

Once we'd moved on from Betty's tearoom, we discovered some old show gardens- created years ago, when all the plants were in pots to make the instant displays. Now these plants and trees have put down roots at Harlow Carr and grown, higher, wider, fuller and more abundantly than even the designer imagined. They are rooted and grounded in good soil.

Let us beware living as pot-bound Christians, in neat containers of instant colour and tidy plants, which look great but don't allow us to grow those deep roots, or produce the abundant branches, leaves, flowers and fruit which God purposes for us. It's frightening and difficult to leave our usual 'pots': our comfort zones in relationships, lifestyle, politics, theology, but as we allow the Holy Spirit into our lives we will comprehend Christ's love more fully and know his love more deeply, just as his first followers did. We too can hear him say, when we are in deep water, far from shore, storm tossed, exhausted or confused, *It is I; do not be afraid.*

As I close, let's pause, then say together verses 20 and 21, as a prayer for ourselves, for St Brandon's, for the wider church in this area, this country and beyond

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.

Amen.