

When I was studying at Wycliffe Theological College in Toronto, one of the students, Gail, made badges. She gave me two. One said simply 'Apart from me you can do nothing.'

It was startling – the message came across powerfully... 'apart from me you can do nothing'. That is the message in this morning's gospel...

We are branches attached to Jesus the vine. This is who we are. We bear fruit by abiding in him...that is the secret of our existence...abiding in him.

Apart from him, we can do nothing.

There is grace in these words...grace when we are exhausted by our own efforts... our fruitfulness depends not on our own efforts, but on our connection to God.

An avid gardener told me one time about a cucumber plot he had planted:

He had been very careful to select the best seeds, and to plant each one at its proper depth. He fertilized and watered the plants, he worked the soil faithfully to keep down weeds and he sprayed to keep away bugs and blight.

The season was a good one - just the right amount of rain and sunshine, and on the vines appeared broad green leaves and then blooms. It looked magnificent!

One day he noticed that here and there certain leaves were dying, certain blooms fading. Most of the leaves remained a healthy glossy green, but among them were those turning brown. Why, he wondered, would some die in the midst of all the living? So he investigated.

Stepping carefully among the tangled mass of vines he traced the ones on which the leaves and blooms were dying, until he found that they were all connected to a single stem. There, just above the ground, cut-worms had severed the stalk. The entire vine was dying because it was no longer attached to the stem that had produced it.

It is a common tale - but it reminds us we are just like those cucumber plants. We die spiritually, when we are not attached to our Lord, the vine.

It also reminds us that the fruit we produce - when we are attached, comes to us as a gift from God.

So what is the fruit we produce...well...the answer is quite simple. The fruit is love. Just a little further on in this passage, Jesus gives the disciples his commandment. The commandment is to love one another. He says it a couple of times, so it's important. He also says abiding in him is abiding in love. Staying with Christ is staying in his love...and staying in his love will produce love.

So how do we stay attached, how do we stay in his love?

Have you ever heard of a man called Brother Lawrence? He was a Carmelite Lay brother who lived in the 1600's in France. He wrote a little book which is now famous, called 'The Practice of the Presence of God.' In it he describes his 'practice of the Presence of God', or his way of abiding, moment by moment in God. He writes....

All we have to do is to recognize God as being intimately present within us. Then we may speak directly to Him every time we need to ask for help, to know His will in moments of uncertainty, and to do whatever He wants us to do in a way that pleases Him. We should offer our work to Him before we begin, and thank Him afterwards for the privilege of having done it for His sake. This continuous conversation would also include praising and loving God incessantly for His infinite goodness and perfection (Presence 19).

Brother Lawrence advises everyone he is in contact with to pursue this constant communion with God in the simplest terms. He writes:

Remember what I advised you to do: Think about God as often as you can, day and night, in everything you do. He is always with you. Just as you would be rude if you left a friend who was visiting you alone, why abandon God and leave Him alone? (Presence 48)

Brother Lawrence suggests that in the midst of a busy life, we can pray continuously, talking to God as a friend, giving praise to God at all times, in all places, in all circumstances, throughout each day. The practice that transformed Br Lawrence can also transform each of us! If we are to encounter God truthfully in prayer, we need to be aware of what we are feeling. A parent will see his or her son come in from school, and know from his face and body-language that he is depressed, or resentful, or anxious, or whatever. If the parent asks how he is, he is likely to say Fine. Most parents will have the intuition and wit to lead

him gently to put words on what he is feeling, and then to trace the happenings that led him to this state, such as a failure in school, a quarrel with a friend or worry about an exam.

It is only when we are in touch with what is going on inside us that we can come before the Lord. Then I can experience the real me connecting with the real God.

We do not need to apologize for our emotions. They just are, in the same way as feeling cold or shivery. When we name our feelings, as the Psalmist does with his anger and despair, then prayer become authentic. I am the vine, you are the branches. Says our Lord. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Let us pray:

Lord show us how to abide in you and be fruitful...help us to really know that apart from you we can do nothing. Amen