

Sermon – St Faith’s, Havant 29 April 2018

The news over the past couple of weeks has been dominated by the political controversy surrounding the Windrush generation. That group of commonwealth citizens, often skilled tradesman, who came over to Britain after the Second World War to help to rebuild the economy at the express invitation of the government. But the destruction of their landing cards by the Home Office in 2010 and an intentionally hostile climate for immigrants created by Theresa May while Home Secretary has made it extremely difficult for some of them to prove their citizenship and to remain. There have been heart-breaking stories of people forced to leave after decades of living here or people who have visited relatives in their country of origin only to be denied entry to the UK again.

The widespread sense of offence and dismay at this behaviour has led to a swift political retreat. Amber Rudd has issued four separate apologies in the past ten days and those affected have been promised swift process of their citizenship applications, every assistance to make their applications, and even unspecified compensation for any costs they may have incurred.

Underneath all this are deeper questions about what it means to be a British citizen, what or who confers British identity and who gets to decide. A nation that used to pride itself on a sense of fairness and hospitality has been found badly wanting over the past couple of weeks.

Our gospel reading this morning records some of the last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. He picks a familiar image, the vine, which was often used in the Old Testament to describe Israel. The prophet Isaiah famously describes God as being a gardener and Israel being like his vineyard.

In our passage this morning, Jesus describes himself as being the true or real vine, it’s a bold claim, because Jesus is claiming that he is the fulfilment of all that Israel was called to be (and which Israel never lived up to). The image is a rich metaphor and invites us to understand it in a variety of different ways but one of the principal ones is to think further about the relationship of abiding. The word abiding (in Greek it’s *menein*) is repeated seven times in this short passage and is used again in the first epistle of John we’ve heard this morning.

A few facts about vines will help us to explore further what abiding might mean. First, the best grapes are to be found closest to the central vine – it’s obvious when you think about it that the fruit that is closest to the central vine will be best nourished and irrigated and that the fruit further away will receive less nutrients. When Jesus tells his disciples that they must abide in him he isn’t saying that this is a casual or accidental abiding. No, abiding in

Jesus is an intense, close, involving relationship and it's when we abide in Jesus in this way we will bear fruit of most value.

Jesus also spells out the consequences of being a branch that isn't close to the central vine, isn't connected into the goodness, nourishment and life that he offers. That branch becomes useless, it's unproductive and it can't do anything on its own. And there are three verbs that describe what happens to it, it is gathered, thrown, and burned. Vine wood is particularly useless for carpentry or carving, it's hard, knotted, uneven wood suitable only for burning. The branch of a vine that is no longer producing any fruit just needs to be cut off and thrown away, burned – it's good for nothing else

Third, just as vineyards are a long-term investment so too is the kind of abiding that Jesus is asking from his disciples. Newly-planted vines are not allowed to produce fruit for the first four or five years and are pruned particularly dramatically to prevent them doing so. It's only with this slow start, and careful attention, that they go on to produce outstanding fruit in the longer term. St Benedict, founder of the Benedictine order, had a deep understanding of what abiding meant. The three vows that a Benedictine monk must make are to obedience, conversion, and *stability*. Benedict was very suspicious of those religious enthusiasts who went from monastery to monastery, like ecclesiastical tourists never settling anywhere – always chasing after the most fashionable religious experience. Stability meant for Benedictines that, unless there were exceptional circumstances, they would stay rooted in the same community for the whole of their lives. In a rapidly changing world, parish communities might offer a similar kind of stability, providing the long-term context in which we know God and are known, and in which we can grow in our Christian discipleship.

So this image of the vine shows us three things about abiding in Jesus that need to be held together: first, we are to remain intensely close to Jesus who is the source of our nourishment and life and if we do this then our lives will bear the fruit of that encounter. Second, we realise a radical dependence on Jesus and that parts of our lives not nourished by his life are passive, inert and are fit only to be removed and destroyed. Third we recognise that abiding in him is for the long-term, it is the invitation to a lifetime of discipleship.

Many people from the Windrush generation have abided here, have made this country their home, in some cases for over five decades now. Which is why refusing them cancer treatment on the NHS, denying them access to employment, or a wide range of other rights of UK citizens is felt as such an acute injustice. So this week let's pray for them and for those who are responsible for granting them justice. Let's pray too for ourselves that we may be inspired by them to show the same tenacity, perseverance, and steadfastness in our commitment to abiding with Jesus.