

“Abiding” a sermon based on John 15:1-8 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 3 May 2015 by Kerry Enright, Knox minister.

Last week, I mentioned that in our front room at home when I was growing up we had two large picture books of World War One. Today, I want to talk about other aspects of growing up in that home. I am speaking about these words of Jesus - “Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit.”

Abiding ...

On our mantle-piece was a bronze Buddha. It sat there in the dining room for over fifty years. It was the largest item on our mantle-piece, indeed the largest ornament in our dining room, the largest ornament in the house. I do not know why it was there, where it came from, what it meant. We never explored what it represented, what it stood for. It generated no stories, and it has now gone to the next generation. It was an inanimate object, an ornament, large and prominent - an abiding presence that bore no fruit. We did not become disciples of Buddha although a representation of him sat on that mantle-piece for over fifty years.

More could be said of our butter-knives. We seemed to have many butter-knives although we rarely used them. Unlike the Buddha, the butter-knives had a story. The story was that my grandmother lived several kilometres away and would walk into town, and would come to my parents' home, unannounced. She would often come around lunch-time and would find that there were no butter-knives on the table. She was quite a disciplined woman, so she learned to bring her own, and leave them. Thus, although my grandmother died when I was two or three, we continued to have in our home, many butter knives, and occasionally used them. In our home, sixty years after my grandmother died, we sometimes bring out butter-knives. So, the memory of my grandmother, and the physical representation of her in our butter-knives, became an occasional part of our lives. She is an abiding presence, and she bore some fruit, but it is episodic, distant, occasional, dribbling out.

Sometimes the abiding presence is of people who are absent. Over the last few weeks, I have read three books of Marilynne Robinson – *Lila*, *Home*, *Gilead*. Wonderful books. I recommend them. One of the characters is John Ames Boughton, Jack, the son who sinned and left home. But his father, and sister and brother, still keep him alive. Occasionally, they would hear news. More occasionally a letter would arrive. Then, once, he turned up for weeks, only to depart again. The son was gifted and he struggled to live at home. Yet, although he was mainly absent, the father pined for the son so much of the father's life was centred on the son, the hope he had for the son, the desire for the son to visit, regret at what the son had become. He and the family became preoccupied by the son's absence. They talked about him. It was an abiding presence, but an absent one.

More can be said of abiding presences in my own life, related to my identity. All around my home town were reminders of who we were. Across the river, six kilometres away, was a marae just below where my great great grandfather built his house in the early 1830s. Every year we went to the annual Tainui celebrations in Ngaruawahia. At least once a year we would go to our local marae and participate in some kind of special event. My parents would point out where they used to live, where my grandparents lived, where my great grandparents lived, where my great great grandparents lived. We visited relatives and I would stay with aunts and uncles and cousins. I learned about who I was from engaging with people, by visiting sites, by being incorporated. Books have been written. Reunions have been held. Maraes have been improved. Relatives have been discovered. And as I have grown, I have learned more about where I come from, where I belong. And, I imagine, more than I can tell, it influences what I do day by day. Yes, there is a lot of abiding here – forming an identity. Even so, it is not so immediate, now, present, active. The abiding rests on what has been and on rediscovering that and exploring its meaning.

The image of abiding is one of ongoing living. It is more than a Bible sitting on our shelves like a Buddha on a mantle-piece. It is more than any inanimate object, including a building or material things surrounding us. It is more than repeating what our forbears did, keeping alive their values and stories. It is more than the presence of an absent family member. It is more than being formed in the past, telling more of the story, remembering encounters that shaped us, living out an already formed identity. These are crucial – but our faith suggests abiding is more than that.

Faith says Christ is a living reality, perpetually new, eternally fresh, always generative, coming to us from our future not just our past; continuing to create and produce, to talk and engage, this day and every day, as far ahead as we can see.

... A vine indeed - a living, growing, breathing, active life – present tense. Abiding means being constantly infused with Christ, entwined in the vine who is Christ, fed by the bread who is Christ, drinking the wine who is Christ.

How?

Christ is the one who reaches out in love for the world. The Christian movement exists to be part of the life of Christ in the world. Christ forms apprentices, disciples, into his body, to embody his presence, to be with him in the world. So every week we have experiences of Christ in our world, of healing and love, of peace and courage, of justice and freedom.

This is Christ in present tense.

The living Christ also experiences massive challenges. Humankind is tempted by other visions. We lose confidence in Christ's power and ability to change the world. We lose courage in the face of opposition.

As the experiences continue, as the challenges continue, we find ourselves needing to be oriented again, won again, retrieved again, for Christ. So we gather.

Yet our movement has learned that abiding, being formed as disciples, means more than worship.

A study was undertaken of the attitudes of people who were regular attenders at worship and people who did not attend worship. Using a range of indicators, on crucial social issues, there was no evident difference between people who attended worship regularly and those who did not. This was a great surprise to Christian educators. It was evident, for example, that people's social background, national identity and political affiliation had more impact on their views than their faith did. It was difficult to see what difference regular attendance at worship made.

So abiding, discipleship, means more than worship.

For some it means wanting to learn who Jesus is all over again, meeting Jesus again for the first time to quote Marcus Borg - wanting to find an authentic faith with fresh meaning, for now; not the past, but the present and the future - abiding.

For some it means accessing online resources, the daily email devotion, the Youtube insights, the facebook friends wondering together - abiding.

For some it means being part of a group stepping out together and then regrouping. I heard on Friday of a small house-group, people who befriended immigrants from Myanmar, discovered how poor were their living conditions, and then mixed with prayer and Bible, acting - abiding.

For some it means asking why, all over again: why church, why Christ, why worship, not taking it for granted - abiding.

For some it means learning meditation, or rediscovering silence, or painting icons, engaging more of the senses - abiding.

For some it means encountering people of other faiths, and being asked searching questions about why we believe - abiding.

For some it means taking their children's questions seriously, wanting to give an adequate answer, wanting to see from their perspective - abiding.

For some it means finding others who want a real, authentic, living, faith, and meeting together - abiding.

There are many opportunities, many paths.

I am not saying that abiding is about activity. It is about relationship, having a means of continually encountering the risen Christ who is alive in our world.

It is:

- More than having a Bible sitting on a shelf.
- More than resting on our forbears' experience.
- More than the presence of an absent family member - a Jesus who once lived.
- More than worship.

“Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit”, Jesus said.