

## Abide in Me

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

**Reading: Acts 8.26-end; 1 John 4.7-end; John 15.1-8**



As we all have heard and seen on the news on Saturday 25 April a massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal, the most powerful earthquake in 81 years. Each night the news has brought us images of the devastation. It is by any reckoning a horrifying emergency with the death toll rising above 5000 and more than 10,000 injured. The government estimates that over 70,000 houses have been destroyed and that 4.2 million people are urgently in need of water, sanitation and supplies.

We are by the supposed reckoning of our own politicians in the UK swayed by self-interest thus our election debate has focused on the economy, our right to buy our own homes, our fear of immigration, tax concessions and individual gain. Yet as so often happens in this country there has been an incredible outpouring of compassion, concern and generosity for the other in the aftermath of the earthquake in Nepal. In the first 24 hours of the DEC Appeal for Nepal they raised £19 million. What gives rise to such compassion?

Perhaps the heart-rending television news reporting we have seen portraying a beautiful people of dignity and courage, victims of a terrible natural tragedy not of their own making.

Perhaps from the links we have with Nepal, as Joanna Lumley pointed out in her appeal: the Gurkhas who have fought for 200 years and in two world wars alongside our British troops with courage and loyalty, the many who have visited Nepal or been captivated by the Himalayas and the mystique of Everest and the stories we grew up with of Edmund Hilary and Tensing and other expeditions - and the steadfast courage of the Sherpa which has defined the humble heroic for us.

But perhaps the outpouring of sympathy also comes from our longing to be able to respond to the suffering of our world in a way that is able to do something tangible to help. We don't know what to do about the migrants crossing into Italy and more than 1750 drowning in the Mediterranean, we

don't know what to do about Syria and the millions who are displaced by war and terrorism, in Iraq or Libya, we don't hear about some disasters like the floods in Malawi but in Nepal we hope our donations can provide immediate life giving practical support.

There seems to be a pattern in our response to natural disaster and very simply it is something like this.

**Stage One: Disaster Strikes:** for certain dramatic disasters there is a media feeding frenzy. Be it the tsunami in South East Asia, or earthquake in Haiti, or floods in Philippines, or cyclone in Vanuatu, or earthquake in Nepal. For the first week there is nonstop reporting as heart-rending pictures and reports fill our screens.

**Stage Two:** The news keeps coming but now it is news of miraculous survivors who even after five days can be pulled from the wreckage. The whole world watches and holds its breath as international NGOs first hear sounds beneath the rubble, and then drill down and many hours later pull a young Nepalese boy from beneath tons of concrete where somehow in an air-pocket he has miraculously survived. He is surrounded by hundreds of cameras, the human story in the midst of disaster. For a moment he is a superstar.

But now the next stage of the disaster: the blame game begins. Why is the aid not getting through fast enough? Emergency relief teams pour in and there is of course inadequate infrastructure to support this massive influx of foreigners with limited local knowledge. After a crisis, already traumatized by the tragedy - the arrival of aid workers brings even greater chaos. The aid workers need their own systems and infrastructure and safety and equipment and servicing and they too are from many different agencies and cultures and languages with many different priorities and competing desires to prove their effectiveness. It's hard enough to cope with floods in Devon but now the world wants instant solutions in one of the most isolated regions of the world. The tiny airport in Nepal clogs up and cannot cope, the roads badly damaged by the earthquake cannot provide the transport needed fast enough, the infrastructure already fragile is overwhelmed, the hospitals are swamped, and the secondary effects kick in - the lack of sanitation, clean water, access to food and adequate shelter. And so the drama continues with increasing recriminations against anyone who can be found to blame.

And then stage four: the story loses its international interest or a new story comes along like the birth of a princess or a General Election or a new world disaster and then quite simply the spotlight is turned off and the world turns away again. Does this sound familiar? Tell me how much we have heard about what is happening in Northern Sumatra today where so many died in the tsunami. What is happening in Haiti today? Or how much have we heard in the last month about the Ebola Crisis? How much do you know about what has happened to those migrants who made it across the Mediterranean and arrived in Italy? How much do you know about the refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in our own detention centers here in the UK or the tragedies that brought them to this country? Indeed how much do we know about the suffering of the person sitting next to us?

The model that Jesus Christ gives us in today's Gospel is a very different model - not of intervention but of divine presence. The word that is repeated both in the Gospel and in the first letter of John is the word "abide." To abide means to remain, to stay, to dwell, to live with, to encamp with, to endure with, to cast one's lot in with. The first letter of John says that "those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." The Gospel today from St John says "Abide in me as I abide in you." To abide is a notion which seems to be reaching towards a truth that is at the heart of our faith. This sense of abiding is not like turning a concern on or off. It is not about a balance sheet or a quantifiable allocation of compassion before you turn away and get on with something else. Abiding is about relationship and long term commitment. It is about a relationship formed in the past, lived out now and there for the future. Abiding is about attentiveness both in the immediate

tragedy but also in the mundane and when there are no easy solutions. It's about listening. It's about being there with the local community. It's about building from the bottom up. It's perhaps easier for us all to rise to those occasional dramatic moments of giving. But it's much harder weeks in to be steadfast. It's much harder to keep on turning up. It's much harder late on a Friday night when you want some time off. How many people will you abide with no matter what? How many people do you know who will stay with you, loyal to you, steadfast, through earthquake and beyond? But that's God's promise to each one of us. We read in Isaiah - "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" God not just there for the dramatic moment, the miraculous salvation of the young boy from the concrete tomb - he's also there for the ones who no one heard except God. God there for those in the tomb and God is there long after the aid workers have gone home. God abiding when your own memory is gone and your hard won independence and personhood has been stripped away by old age. The psalmist writes "If I go up to heaven you are there, if I go down to the grave you are there also...I come to an end you are still with me"

Jesus says "I am the vine you are the branches."

In the hills of Perugia in Italy a few weeks ago I watched farmers tending their olive trees. It was not done with a trimmer just slicing the tree into shape. Nor was it like the clippers at a barber giving a crew cut, or like those country hedging machines ripping away the habitat of the hedgerows - no there was something so attentive in the pruning. The nature of the pruning was not to cut the tree into a prescribed shape but to allow the tree to find its own true shape. To allow for its growth. To give the branches their own space, the space to grow. It gave me insight into our Gospel today. I had also seen this Gospel as a kind of threat that if you didn't follow what God wanted you would be cut away and thrown into the fire. God with a strimmer - but this image was different - God the vine dresser - the God who cares for the whole tree. The holistic God. God attentive to every branch because God is not separate but intimately involved: his own son, his beloved son is the vine itself, the body which gives all life.

Thus this pruning is not an act of sabotage or punishment, it is an act of love. We are all mutually interdependent. We abide with and for each other. We need the vine, the vine needs us. Our lives depend upon our interconnectedness. Cut off from another we will wither and die. That's the true nature of our interdependent world. In this poetic image of our relationship there is no hierarchy it is a shared belonging. One branch is not superior to another, each branch is connected through Christ. Christ is not going to give up on us because by his very nature he is the one who connects and gives us life. That is his very being.

In the epistle we heard today, in a dazzling intuition, St. John expresses who God is in three words: "God is love."

Yes all God can do is give his love; that sums up the whole Gospel. Abide in that love and God will abide in you. Dare to give that same love for others. In the seen and unseen, in prayer, in action, even in the darkness, each day present **now**, even when it hurts, even when you don't know why you are doing it, dare to love God and love your brothers and sisters of every nation for they too are the branches of the same vine. They belong to you. They belong to God. "Love and say it with your life." How simplistic you may say, how naïve. Yes as simple and naïve as a carpenter's son who gave his life in love. He is the vine, you are the branches - you the congregation of St Martin's, or you the people of Nepal, you the migrant and the exile, you in the storm on the sea, you the homeless and the condemned, you the rich pulled down, you the sinner lifted up, you the one who longs to be unbound and set free from the tomb - Jesus said I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me. We sometimes think our material world is the reality and God the delusion but perhaps we are being called to abide in a new greater reality - the reality of the one whose love is the very root and vine of our being.