

COME AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

→ Well, it may only be the end of August, but within our Methodist Church circles, this marks the last Sunday of another Connexional year; the last Sunday before we start another year in our life together; the last Sunday before all our meetings and activities and programmes kick back into action big style!

.....Very often, when we find ourselves at the beginning of a calendar year there is that sense of new beginnings; of being able to leave behind all that's been negative and look ahead to something far more positive in the future. As New Years start, we often resolve to do things differently, to avoid our past mistakes and to let this year be a year to remember.

→ Tonight we have an opportunity to reflect on the year through which we have just travelled and to pray for one another as we embark upon another year together. There's no doubt that for all sorts of reasons this is going to be a year full of challenges and changes. It will see our building project being launched and it will mark the end of my ministry amongst you. It will see Alison joining our team of paid staff and it will see us exploring what it means to have a ministry of healing and wholeness. And that's just what we already know about. Who knows what else might happen as we journey on together. For some of us, some or all of those things may seem incredibly exciting; for others there may still be a sense of anxiety about what it will all mean for us.

.....As we look back over the last year, no doubt different things will come to mind for each of us; things that have been significant in our own lives or in our life together here in this church. But whatever we think of, it will undoubtedly include relationships with other people somewhere along the line. Perhaps your prayer triplet or your Home Group has been a highlight of the year for you. Maybe it was the visit of a particular preacher that was significant. Whatever it has been, relationships are always important on our journey. But most important of all must surely be our relationship with God and our understanding of his purpose for us in the year that lies ahead.

.....So, as we arrive at this New Year, albeit a Methodist year, we have a great opportunity to ask ourselves the question: How is our relationship with God? Are we full of anticipation about what God might do in our lives or in our families or in the life of this church or the other churches in this community or the Circuit or are we not really carrying any expectation of God really being bothered about us at all?

→ The gospel passage that we've heard this evening seems to have something to say to us about all of this because it's all about relationships and it starts with the relationship between Jesus and God. "I am the real vine and my Father is the gardener." So, God is the gardener, working with purpose, with design and with a long term view and he plants the vine of Jesus to grow and bear fruit. And then Jesus continues, "I am the vine and you are the branches." God plants the vine that is Jesus into the world – "he moves into our neighbourhood" as The Message paraphrase of this passage so powerfully puts it, and we are the branches. We are the limbs of the vine that bear the fruit. We are God's chosen people, expected to bear fruit and to bring glory to God as we do.

.....And the fruit? Well, that's the new lives that come into relationship with Jesus Christ and it's also the flourishing of love and joy and peace, in fact all the fruits of the Spirit in our lives. And Jesus says that all of this will only happen as we are located firmly to the vine that is Jesus Christ, who remains in God. The key to our relationship with God lies in

those words in verses 4 and 5, "Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." So, given that "remaining in Jesus" is the key to our healthy relationship with God, how might we do that over this coming year?

→ Well, first of all, to remain in Jesus means to keep moving! That may seem rather nonsensical and a bit of a contradiction because surely remaining usually signifies staying in one place. But when reading God's word it's always a good idea to look at the context of the passage that you're studying! In this case, if you look at the end of chapter 14 of John's gospel, you find Jesus saying to his disciples, "Come, let us go from this place." And as they go, Jesus teaches them about remaining in him on the way.

.....Unsettling as it may often be for us, Jesus is always saying to us, individually, or as a family, or as a church, or indeed as a Circuit, "Come, let us go from this place!" He always has something new for us; something that will perhaps challenge us to understand the Cross more deeply; something that will enable us to serve the world more fully. But working out where we're heading isn't always easy as many of us know only too well. The work of the Vision Group has involved us in much ongoing prayer and discernment as we have developed the building project, and negotiated the process of employing a Pastoral Worker and continue to explore the ministry of healing and wholeness.

.....There is perhaps always a danger that these words "remaining and abiding" will persuade us that what we really need to do is be steadfast and firm and stay exactly as we are, but in fact, it really is quite the opposite. Remaining in Jesus is about keeping up with Jesus and you'll know from reading the gospels that Jesus didn't actually stay in one place for very long! Our sense as a church has been that Jesus is saying to us, "Come, let us go from this place." Let's move on from this settled scenario to new and exciting challenges that he has in store for us and so we are stepping forward in faith in the areas that I've already mentioned this evening and you may be able to think of others too, because it's also in the tougher bits of church life like the constant challenge to recruit sufficient helpers in particular ministries that causes us to wonder if God isn't also saying to us in those areas, "Come let us go from this place." Let us move on to something new and even more exciting.

→ And then, secondly, to remain in Jesus means remaining firmly within the church community. The vine presents us with a really interesting image. It's an image that worked well for Jesus in his particular context, because vines were a common sight in that part of the world. I guess not too many of us are that familiar with vines. Not many of us have them growing in our back gardens! But, the intriguing thing about a vine is that the branches aren't "one here and then one there." They're all incredibly intertwined and trying to work out how they're all actually individually joined to the vine itself is like doing one of those children's puzzles where you have to discover which child has the dog's lead in their hand, or who is holding the balloon by following the thread through the tangle of lines on the page.

.....So what is that image of the vine saying? Well, it seems to be suggesting that remaining in Jesus; being a branch that remains in Jesus also involves being thoroughly entwined with other branches. I recognise that seeing our lives as interdependent rather than striving for complete independence is quite counter cultural. It's hard and we struggle with admitting that we are interdependent rather than independent. But it's by living our lives in a Christian community that we grow; rubbing shoulders against those that we find it hard to understand; practising the art of receiving as well as giving.

.....During this next year as we work closely together, particularly perhaps as the fundraising for the building project begins, and as we get to know new members of staff that have joined the Circuit and as we continue to get to know people from across the Circuit that we not yet even have met, we will all have the opportunity to allow our lives to become entwined with a whole new bunch of people who themselves are seeking to remain in Christ and bear fruit for him. And it will be precisely by our rubbing together that all of us will mould ourselves and grow in our walk with God. It's by remaining with each other, that we remain in Christ.

→ So, Jesus has said, and will continue to say, from time to time, "Come, let us go from this place." This year that lies ahead is bound to be a year that takes us to new places, new challenges and new relationships and we need to walk this road together. Our relationship with God can never truly be just "you and him." It must always have an element of "us and him" so that we experience that interdependence that is so much an aspect of our connexional life within the Methodist Church, but more importantly so much a part of the life in community that we are called to live.

.....This is all really important stuff. We may think we know what lies ahead because of what we have sensed God doing amongst us in the past, but nothing is ever certain. The important thing is that as individuals, as churches and as a Circuit, we remain in him, trusting that fruit will grow, so that God's glory will be seen in us, whatever the future holds.

.....And we remain in him by moving on with him. We remain in him by remaining with each other. So "Come, let us go from this place" and place our hand very firmly in the hand of God who calls us forward.