

## Fifth Sunday after Easter 18

Joint Service followed by APCM

Acts 8. 26-40; 1John 4.7-21 & John 15.1-8

It is very good to be together today as one parish.

A lot of our business is to do with the maintenance of our two buildings – which, as the inscription on this pillar reminds us are here ‘*for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom*’. The stones of the two buildings we enjoy are here to house the Living Stones of the church. That’s us. We are also here ‘*for the glory of God and the advancement of his Kingdom*’, and the three magnificent readings today show us plainly how we remain Living Stones and how we can guard against becoming Ossified Stones.

The Living Stones of the church are those people who have been incorporated into the life of Christ through baptism and on whom the gift of the Holy Spirit has been bestowed. This is the beginning of the *abiding* that these readings talk about.

Abiding shouldn’t be hard work. If we are trying too hard, we probably aren’t abiding. On Wednesday at Deanery Clergy chapter we enjoyed seeing some photos of the recent deanery Holy Land trip, including a picture of the Dead Sea –

that salty water where you can float with no effort. I think of abiding as floating – it is the water we swim in, it is about ‘being’, not ‘doing’. Of course, we can choose to deliberately step out of the water, and then we will stop ‘abiding’.

God gives us his life through Baptism and we are called to remain in that love, because it is the very source of life itself. If we are going to reflect God’s glory in the world, then we need to stay close to that glory and be the people he wants us to be.

When we stay close to God, then his gift of love grows in us – it abounds in us more and more so that we become more like Jesus, who is the perfect reflection of God’s image. The Bible has another word for this and it is Fruit. We bear much fruit if we stay connected to the vine. What is being described here is an organic process. You don’t see plants *trying really hard* to bear fruit – they just do if they are given the right conditions in which to grow.

We abide in God’s life and love so that we will abound in love and service to the world. The Love of God works itself out in very practical ways. It means we must love each other, even the ones who annoy us. We must walk in love, not fear.

In the reading from Acts we have a textbook example of what that abounding in Love and bearing much fruit looks like.

Philip, one of the seven deacons appointed by the church in Jerusalem – (note: not Philip the Apostle) is an evangelist as well as a servant of the church.

- He hears the word of God through the Angel
- He obeys
- He is called to get alongside someone who is already curious about the faith revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- He takes his opportunity to explain about Jesus in the context of the questions the Ethiopian eunuch was actually asking
- He accompanies the man on his swift journey towards baptism.

For Philip, this was his fruit – his abounding in love, drawing someone into fellowship with God and his church.

My ambitions for our parish are simple. That together, we might go deeper in our abiding and wider in our abounding. Loving God and our neighbour.

Becoming more like Jesus through walking closely with him in prayer, worship, study and fellowship so that can demonstrate the fruit of love, tolerance, forgiveness and service to those around us.

If people look at us and say: '*my ... how those Christians love each other*', then that will be a fantastic witness in a world of mistrust and hate.

And when we meet people who are curious about the faith, then we might also feel confident to model Philip's example of evangelism –

- to listen to the prompting of God,
- to act on it,
- to get alongside the person who is curious and asking questions,
- to be confident in explaining the Gospel and
- to accompany that person on the journey of faith.

We are God's living stones in this place; what is the fruit that you are growing, and how might that be used here for the glory of God and the advancement of his Kingdom.