

May I speak in the name of the true God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.

I was one of the people who took up the challenge to read the bible in a year. It was made easier by the lockdowns, which meant that I had time I my hands. However I still struggled with it, sometimes being as much as a week behind and having to spend all day catching up, and that made me feel like giving up. Sometimes however, the story was so gripping that I got ahead of myself, as I couldn't wait to see what happened next. Some of it was boring, to be honest and some of the names were impossible to pronounce. But my main problem was that I didn't understand some of it and wished that I had Philip to explain it to me as the Ethiopian did in today's reading.

Philip made such a good job of explaining about Jesus that the man asked to be baptised there and then! Amazing.

It is more amazing when you realise that the disciples, who were good friends of Jesus, had to have the truth told to them time and again and still they had difficulty understanding it, even when it was spelt out to them in simple parables. So we are in good company.

How can we understand it more easily? Hopefully our sermons inspire you. Meeting together is the easiest way. It's wonderful that so many join us on our livestream and it makes us accessible to many more people, but please don't get into the habit of rolling out of bed at 5 to 11 and watching us from the sofa, wearing your pyjamas, with a cuppa in your hand. If you can get here please do, because we do miss you.

So what do we learn today.

St. John's epistle reminds us that God sent his only Son to reconcile us to God because he loves us so much. While we have been separated from family and friends we have come to realise, I hope, how much we need the love of those people. But the love of God extends far beyond anything else. He loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for our sins and as a result of dying for our sins, Jesus gives us the chance to have eternal life. And what do we have to do in

return? We are asked to love God first and foremost and then to love others as God loves us.

Imagine a world where everyone loved each other. We would all have enough to eat, there would be no war, children would grow up healthy and so smaller families could become the norm and the resources of the planet would not be wasted. We would be more careful with our world. Each person would be able to attain their full potential. John says that perfect love drives out fear. So many people are fearful today, and as a veterinary nurse I know that the fearful dog is the one that bites first and asks questions later. We find it difficult to love those who are different to ourselves, but the Holy Spirit can help us to be more open to meeting those different from ourselves.

We begin then to grow into the type of people that God wants us to be. Jesus again explains it simply to his friends. He himself is the true vine. He is rooted firmly in the Father, who is like a gardener, caring for the plant and ensuring a good crop. And we are that crop. If we stay with the vine, learning more about Jesus, we will grow and flourish. We will be a crop that bears much fruit.

We need to use that fruit to feed our world. If we say nothing about our faith the fruit that we are will eventually shrivel and die on the vine and fall off – useless and wasted. But if the fruit is picked and eaten it nourishes those we meet. Now when I go round the supermarket I look at the fruit and I pick what looks good. But if I just leave it in the fruit bowl it isn't going to do any good at all. Take an apple. I can just bite it, or bake it, stuffed with sultanas, or I could make a pie and smother it in custard or cream or even icecream. And so it is with us. We are different, we have different skills and it is in the practical way that we live our lives that we demonstrate to others that God's love lives in us and that we want to share it with the world around us. Can we be generous? We might not have much money, but we may have spare time. Do we sell our unwanted things on Vinted? Or do we give them to someone who needs them? Do we hoard things? Or do we have space in our homes to invite folk in? Do we walk about with a scowl or a smile? Do we remember our please and thankyou's?

Take time out today to think how you can share God's love more freely with those around you. As you practise it becomes easier and a habit for life.

Finally, it isn't too late to start reading the bible in a year. I'm sure Father Bob can still give you a leaflet with the daily readings, and this time because we are back together, you can ask him about the things that you find difficult to understand. Muslims are supposed to read the Koran every Ramadan. So maybe we all should start again too. And if that sounds a tall order begin by reading the daily readings on the back of your service booklet, knowing that others are reading those very same readings and learning from them.

Happy reading. Amen