

You may have noticed in that gospel reading that there was one word that came a lot. In fact, it came eight times, the word abide. And it was also there in the epistle from 1 John. It was six times there. So, we've heard the same word 14 times in two readings. And it's the translation of a Greek word, "μένω" (men-o), that was a favorite of John the gospel writer. He uses it many times in his writings, he uses it all the way through his gospel, but we don't often or always notice it because the same word "μένω" (men-o) in English is translated with many different other words. So, we don't always notice that he's using the same word. So, it was clearly something that was important to him. In fact, I think it's vital to understanding his gospel, certainly the passage that we've just heard read from his gospel.

So, I don't often do this in sermons, but today I just want to focus on that one word and see how John uses it in the gospel, because I do think that it helps to make sense of that wonderful passage that Jesus talks about the vine and the branches. And I'm doing this knowing that abide is not a word that comes up in regular conversation. You are unlikely to say, I think, "Oh, just abide here for a few minutes whilst I go into Vons." Or, "She abode with me till the concert started." It's a word more suited to Victorian hymns like Abide With Me, which I think must be sung at least 75% of funerals in England and, strangely, before our equivalent of the Super Bowl.

So, let me try and explain a bit about this word abide, the Greek word "μένω" (men-o). And I'll begin by going right back to the beginning of the gospel. In the first chapter is where it first appears, where two disciples asked Jesus the question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" That's the English translation. In Greek it's, "where are you μένω (men-o)?" This would seem to be a straightforward question. It's close to being asked, "where are you from? What's home for you?" And Jesus could have said Nazareth or Bethlehem or wherever he happened to be staying in Bethany at the time, but he doesn't. He simply says, "Come and see." And that's an invitation, not just to those two disciples, but to all the readers of the gospel. That's the clue

which to understand how we're to read that gospel aright, that we too, as readers of the gospel, as followers of Jesus, we too are to follow the answer to that question, to come and see where Jesus is from, and the whole book of John's Gospel is answering that question, as it reveals Jesus' identity and explanation of where he resides. So, this word comes a lot in the middle of the gospel, chapters 14 and 15, like the passage that we've just heard. We read verses like this where Jesus says, "I'm in the Father and the Father is in me. The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his work." And we can't really tell in English, but "μένω" (men-o) is the key word as well in this verse, it comes at the end of the verse where the Father dwells in Jesus, resides, he lives in Jesus. Jesus says, "The Father μένω (men-o) in me."

And this verse is one of those verses in John's Gospel which makes incredible claims about Jesus and who he is, things like, "I'm in the Father and the Father is in me." Jesus says. Elsewhere, he says, "I and the Father are one." Or, "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father." Or to put it in terms of this verse, the Father resides in Jesus, Jesus resides in the Father.

John's Gospel goes further than any other gospel in identifying Jesus as sharing in God's divinity. He stresses both the distinctiveness of Jesus from his father, but also their unity. He doesn't use the word Trinity, but that's where he's going. He's opening up that idea of God in three and God as one.

In verses like the one we've just heard, Jesus is starting to answer the disciples' question, "Where are you staying? Where are you from?" He's from God. Jesus is of God. God dwells in him in a unique way. But John's use of the word "μένω" (men-o) doesn't end here. John has established that Jesus has this unique relationship with God and that it's his mission to make his father known, to introduce us to the Father. And then we get to lovely verses like this where Jesus says, "My Father and I will come to them and make our home with them." Or more exactly, "My Father and I will come and μένω

(men-o) with them", to "dwell, reside, we'll make our home with them".

And this is the third and final stage of John's usage of this word. He's presented Jesus as having this unique, intimate relationship with his father. Jesus dwells, abides in God. And then he goes on to say that we are invited to dwell, to stay there too. The purpose of Jesus's coming was to draw us into that relationship that he shares with God the Father. The Trinity is not enclosed. God is love. We are invited into those network of relationships that make up the Trinity. It's an open Trinity which draws us in.

And so, we come to the image of the vine. "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." We're to "μένω" (men-o) in Jesus as he "μένω" (men-o) in us.

So, we've come a long way from the simple question in chapter one, where are you staying? The image of Jesus as the vine and us as the branches speaks of where we are at home. It's a rich image. It invites us to rest in God, to dwell in him, to look for our nourishment from him as a branch draws on the nutrients in the stem of the vine. It speaks of flourishing. The best grapes on the vine are those closest to the stem. So, we thrive and flourish as we're connected to Jesus the vine.

And we do that by being quiet, by praying, by reading the Bible, by coming to church and sharing in the Eucharistic feast we are about to share together. And I'm mindful that all this can sound very individualistic, that abiding in God is something that I can do all on my own. We all have a tendency to interpret spiritual things individually, and that tendency starts at a young age. I heard of a grandfather this week who took his granddaughter out for ice-cream, and he said, "Hold my hand as we cross the road." Well, she defiantly took her left thumb in her right hand and said, "I can hold my own hand."

I reckon we've all said something similar at some point. And this image of the vine invites us to see

our spiritual journey as a communal activity. We journey with others, we abide with our fellow branches, and we can't dictate how they'll grow.

Vines grow in a very messy and tangled way. When Jesus says, "I'm the vine and you are the branches" the you is plural. It's all of us. Whether we like it or not, our lives are bound up with others. The fruit we share in the world is the fruit we produce together. If you were here last week, you'll have heard Katina talking about what she does at St. Mark's Food Pantry. And I hope others can join her in that. That's an example of St. James bearing fruit.

So, let's ponder this image this week of us as branches connected to the vine. And as we do that, let's look to abide in Jesus, to rest in him, to find our home in him.

Amen.