

JOHN 15:1-8
CONNECTIONS

Connections – we all have connections. None of us lives in isolation, even if we would like to! There have been people who withdrew from all contact with other people – we call them hermits and they would have cut all their connections with the world and with other people; we tend to think of them as “eccentric”! These connections that we have are of all different sorts, and they are simply part and parcel of life; some of these are good for us, and bring life to us and energy; some connections are much more stressful to us, even cause us angst, but even some of these we would never do without. Most connections need to be fed and nurtured, otherwise they will die off: A Christmas card keeps us connected! So let’s think about our connections. The leaf is a picture of these connections, and shows us different kinds of connections, some stronger than others, some much more fragile.



We have connections with other people and these come in all sorts of ways and at all kinds of levels. Family is the most intimate connection most of us will have, physical intimacy, nothing is kept secret; these are the people we might spend most of our time with, the people with whom we connect most often. We have friendships: people we went to school with or university; people we lived next door to for a long while or who still live in our street; people we work(ed) beside and have spent long time together on tasks and projects and have got to know them well. There are people we meet on the street, some we might meet every day and maybe we even pass the time of day with them as we pass; we may not even know their name, but we feel a vague connection to them at times, or people meet at the school gate, people we meet in the shops. We realise how important these connections are when we move house and have to make new connections and how hard that is!

Some of these connections are more important than others. Some of these we would work hard at not only keeping, but making them better: family connections fall into that category as we eat together, we watch TV, we go through shared experiences that are great or shattering, we go on holiday, we enjoy all sorts of things together and we are family. Family connections are not always good, but we never really give up on family. Friendships come at different levels: we have friends we’ve known for a long time and whenever we meet (which is not as often as we would like) we simply pick up from where we left off; other friendships and acquaintances are such that they might come to an end, because we move away or the connection drops, we retire from work, we’re not at the school gate any more. These are some of our connections with other people.

We have a connection with the church. For some of us that is a life-long connection that is rock-solid; nothing will break that connection. For others, it is a new thing, you’ve come to it only recently perhaps, because you’ve just discovered the value of church. Some have lost that connection either entirely, or they come back after years away. We come to that connection in all sorts of ways: for some of us we have come to it through Sunday School and Youth Fellowship; for others we can add in Scripture Union camps and so as a child and young adult that connection has been nurtured and added to later by our profession of faith and our commitment to the Church in membership. Maybe we’ve taken on roles and responsibilities in church life and we enjoy the social interaction of other people who share that same connection. Martin Bashir, the BBC religious correspondent was writing in Radio Times at Easter and he reflected on the nature of these connections in the UK. He grew up a Muslim in Pakistan and is now a Christian. He said that fewer people are making connections with the church because their family did, as something they inherit; more people are making connections with the church because they are making a choice and a commitment – their connection tends to be

stronger. Some people have had a connection with the church in the past, but have lost that connection for some reason, either to do with church or to do with them!

Arguably, the most important connection we have is our connection with Jesus. Our connection with Jesus gives shape to all our other connections and helps us make these others good. *“I am...” (John 15:5)* Let’s not try to work out how exactly that works in minute detail; others have tried, few have succeeded. Take the big picture and run with it. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches – it’s all about being connected to Jesus. We are part of Him, in a sense; He gives us life; *“If a...” (John 15:5)* all that we are is tied up in this connection. So Jesus says to us: *“Remain...” (John 15:4)* Keep that connection to Jesus; do whatever it takes to keep that connection; it means life, it means the world to us to be connected to Jesus, a connection not to be lost at all costs. This is not a connection to the church; this is a different kind of connection, a more personal connection with Jesus Himself, a connection which should be nurtured by our connection with the Church, but it does not always happen that way.

Paul writes to the church in Colossae about their connection with Jesus and he describes how it comes about in the first place. Jesus has come into the world and has done great things; we have heard about Him and have come to faith in Him; we have given ourselves to Him in faith, dying to our ego but begin raised to a new kind of life with Jesus as Lord. But he then describes other things that get in the way of that connection: the minutiae of religious life, our pride and ego are coming back, losing a sense of grace; and Paul makes a quite concerning diagnosis: *“he has...” (Colossians 2:19)* There are things in this man’s life that have led to the breaking of his connection with Jesus and so he has lost that connection, things even in his religious life, things about him as a person, and these have led to that connection being broken.

So Paul writes: *“so then...” (Colossians 2:6f)* Jesus says *“remain...” (John 15:4)* The key-word is “resilience”; communities are to be resilient; we are to be resilient; it means being strong in the face of many different, difficult things. We are to be resilient in our Christian faith, in our connection with Jesus. Faith is not something to treat lightly or to throw away easily; there are lots of pressures on faith today and we are to continue to be connected to Jesus in face of all these pressures. Atheists will tell us that faith is a fairy-story made up to keep us happy; others will tell us that faith has no place in the public square of a modern Scotland; hard things of life will lead us to question the love of God for us, or if God is there at all, let alone that God answers our prayers and loves us. In face of all of that and more, we are called to remain connected to Jesus, to continue in our faith, to be resilient, sustained by grace of God for us in Jesus.

Pay attention to our connection with Jesus. “There are few people who deliberately and in a moment turn their backs on God; there are many who day by day drift farther and farther away from Him.” (Barclay) We make little choices that seem quite insignificant when we make them; then we make another choice and another and then after a few years we look and discover that we’ve drifted away from Jesus and from faith and the connection has been lost, or at least severely stretched. We didn’t mean to lose connection, but it has happened while we’ve been unaware. So many people in our community who once were part of a church, but for whatever reason are now no longer there; they will still say that they believe in Jesus, but the connection is a lot more fragile than it once was; much of it has happened by that sense of drift!

“Remain...” (John 15:4) How do we make sure that we remain connected to Jesus? We need to nurture that connection and feed it. When we do nurture that connection, we live fruitful lives. God has given us three things that help us keep that connection and even make it stronger. The Bible, prayer and the Church – all three of these lead us to Jesus or should; all three should feed our faith and nurture that connection. We read the Bible and it tells us about Jesus, it shows us Jesus and it feeds our faith; we can’t take it in by osmosis, we actually need to read it and listen to it. Prayer reminds us of what Jesus has done for us and feeds our sense of depending on Him. Church and being part of the church, encourages us in our faith, reminds

us of who Jesus is and what He has done and should make our faith stronger. These are things for us to do to keep that connection with Jesus alive.

What is your greatest achievement as a Christian? I'll leave you to think about that for a second; we're not even sure that we have achievements? What is your greatest achievement as a Christian? This is a question about fruit: that we have become more like Jesus? (that's the fruit of the Spirit under a different guise!) That we told someone else about Jesus? That we brought someone to Church? I'm not looking for numbers to compare; this is not a competition to see who has the most! What is the fruit of our faith? Is it some service that we have given to someone in need or to the life of the church? Fruit comes from our connection with Jesus; Jesus wants us to remain in Him and to bear even more fruit as a result of that connection! What will the harvest be like in us?

Stay connected! We are connected to other people; some of us have lots of connections, others only a few. We are connected to the Church by virtue at least of being here today. How well are we connected with Jesus? *"I am..." (John 15:5)* is all about being connected with Jesus. Are we connected with Jesus? Or have we lost that connection, having drifted away from faith and we are trying to find way back? *"Remain..." (John 15:4)*