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Abiding Faith¹ (John 15. 1-8)

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In this past week, I together with several others from our Benedictus community had the privilege of attending a retreat led by Cynthia Bourgeault at Jamberoo Abbey near Kiama. Cynthia is an American Episcopalian priest, a spiritual teacher, writer and teacher of Centering Prayer; and our own Peter Ahern, supported by Judy, was one of the main organisers of this significant national event.

There's a lot I could talk about, from this experience, and a lot I still have to process for myself. But what I wanted to share tonight has to do with the experience of being at the Abbey over these few days – able to join in the worship of this community of Benedictine nuns and taste a little of their life of prayer. Because there's something in this experience which illuminates for me what it means to 'abide in Christ' – to practise the 'abiding' on which our reading insists.

As many of you know, a Benedictine monastic community prays the 'hours' – that is, it prays at set times of day – every day – in a continuous rhythm of communal prayer. According to Benedict's rule in the 6th century, there were eight periods of prayer set down per day – starting with night prayer (Vigils or Matins – around midnight) and going more or less three-hourly through the day to end with Compline at about 9pm. Vatican II saw a modification of this monastic program – the nuns at Jamberoo Abbey pray Vigils at 4.30am, Lauds with Eucharist at around 8am, Midday Prayer, Vespers at 5pm and then Compline at night.

¹ My title references Scott Cowdell, *Abiding Faith: Christianity Beyond Certainty, Anxiety, and Violence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2009).

It's quite an experience to participate in this rhythm of life – even for only three days. Partly, you have to get used to the priority of prayer. Sometimes there doesn't feel much time between one session and the next. You might just be getting into some task or reflection, the bell goes – and you drop what you are doing, and gather once more to pray. It's not that the nuns don't have other things to be getting on with – they do. But the work of prayer is at the heart of things.

What I started to experience by participating in this was a deepened sense of the sheer given-ness of the presence of God. Sometimes we relate to prayer as if we're addressing a God who is *elsewhere*, asking God to come near or do something special or intervene from on high. But this way of prayer is more like a practice for acknowledging the *continuous* presence of God – like being with someone at home, and every three hours or so, stopping to have a cup of tea with them. They're there – and you know they are. Having a cup of tea is just a way of spending time, reconnecting, being with ... it's a way of giving thanks that they are there. Nothing dramatic, and yet utterly transforming of the experience of daily life – because it means we're not alone, we are companioned, no matter what else is going on. It is part of the monastic vocation to be consciously present to this reality – which the rest of us so often forget.

During the week, there was for me one particularly powerful experience of the effect of this practice of conscious presence and companioning. I didn't have access to the news on retreat. On Monday and Tuesday, one of the nuns prayed aloud for Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran. She prayed that mercy would be shown, and that they would know peace because their executions were imminent. On Wednesday morning, she prayed for their souls and their families. That was how we found out it had happened. Despite the long anticipation, I found it still shocking and distressing. And yet – and this is hard to express without sounding glib – in the context of their being held in that stream of prayer, I had a palpable sense that everything that had happened was still inside God who is continuously present,

everywhere. These two men were not and could not be separated from the love of God, and although it doesn't justify or condone their deaths, and although suffering and grief remain, yet paradoxically I also had a felt sense of Julian of Norwich's assurance that 'all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.'

And this, I take it, is the experience of 'abiding in Christ', of entrusting ourselves and one another to the risen Christ, whom death could not contain and whose forgiving presence shows forth the endlessly hospitable love and mercy of God. For a long time, in my journey of faith, I thought that what I needed to do was believe certain things, or have certain special experiences; I thought faith was about trying hard, grasping something and then finding ways to hand it over like a deposit to others. But that's exactly the wrong way around. Faith is not me holding onto something, but letting myself be held. It isn't having certain propositions in my head, but discovering myself welcome and at home in a compassionate reality vastly bigger than me. It's discovering that the more I yield, or make myself available to this reality, the more my whole life will share in its energy. And that's what proves its truth.

Jesus said: 'Abide in me as I abide in you' – that is dwell in me, make yourself at home. 'Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine', he goes on, 'neither can you unless you abide in me ... those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing'.

How do we practise this? How do we abide? As Cynthia insisted again and again, we abide by letting go, yielding, giving our 'yes' to God. We stop trying to be stand-alone, self-sufficient vines, and are content to be branches. This is the essence of contemplative prayer – a practice of handing ourselves over to a reality that is given, that we don't invent or construct or have to make believe. It's frightening at first – because until we have given ourselves, we don't know for sure we will be held – and that's what faith is. Not trying to believe six impossible things before breakfast,

but daring to entrust ourselves to a reality that is, in James Alison's words, 'massively prior to us'.

In my experience, we dare this only when we desire it deeply enough – when our yearning to be fully real, our yearning for God, has ripened; we dare it only when we've got to the end of all the ways we try to hang onto some piece of ourselves, some safety net, some part of our life not yielded to the way. We dare it, although we're not sure exactly what we are getting into, when we know in our bones there's nothing else for us to do. So one day – we say yes. And the spiritual life is the practice of continuing to say yes, at deeper and deeper levels of our being.

For most of us, it won't take the form of monastic life. But it's the same 'yes'. And it's what we do as we gather at Benedictus, week by week. We deepen our consent, we receive healing and mercy, we continue to become, in company with one another, fruitful branches of the one vine. Thanks be to God.