

Acts 8.26-40; 1 John 4.7-12; John 15.1-8

Nature versus nurture is an age-old debate. Is a child formed more by the way they are raised, or is their personality shaped from within, innately? It is fascinating to see who children are as they grow up. What traits or preferences will they inherit, or what skills or quirks might they have that seem to be all their own?

I am a peacemaker and compromise finder, a bridge builder and negotiator, so I am of course going to support both nature and nurture at the same time! It seems clear that some aspects of a person are simply who they are, hard-wired into the brain from birth. But, it also seems obvious that we are all influenced by the people and circumstances in our lives.

There are some fascinating stories of twins separated at birth who find each other later in life and realise that they have some strange things in common, like hobbies, food dislikes, certain body language or the way they carry themselves. But other aspects of us, our belief systems, our experiences, the language we speak, our cultural understandings, and our faith, are shaped by those who teach us, by those who guide us through life. Of course, those who we spend the most

time with are likely to have the most impact, but we can also be profoundly changed by small encounters. Someone can say one thing to you that sticks and becomes part of the brickwork of who you are.

This slightly strange meeting of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch seems to be one such brief encounter. Interestingly the eunuch already has a faith - he had come to Jerusalem to worship, implying that he was a member of the Jewish faith who worshipped Yahweh. But he is reading something written by the prophet Isaiah and it isn't making sense to him. So Philip just runs up and gets invited into his carriage, and tells him all about Jesus, about the Messiah who was promised and who came, the lamb led to the slaughter who died and came back to life.

Maybe this took a couple of hours or so, but in the space of one afternoon, this influential man has his life changed. He is baptised, then continues on his way and presumably goes on to tell those back home about what he has learned.

I wonder what the ripple effect of this day was. I wonder how many people became Christians because of the Ethiopian eunuch, and how many were impacted by his

faith bearing influence on his actions as a man of power. I wonder if Philip ever heard anything of him again, or this brief encounter was the only time their paths crossed. I suspect that the faith nurtured here was significant, for why else would God prompt Philip to go and find this man reading scripture in his chariot in the first place? But we don't know, and Philip didn't know.

Nature and nurture - both probably have deeper impact than we think about. Nurturing can be such an everyday occurrence, just a short conversation, just a sentence or two, or an example, or a way someone acts that we admire.

I wonder who, for you, has been significant in shaping your own thoughts and beliefs. Who have you admired and tried to emulate in some way? Who has been influential in building your faith?

For me there are so many examples I can think of, and I know there are others that I've forgotten, but which are still woven into the fabric of who I am.

It's worth remembering the effect that we have on each other. To be human is to influence and be influenced by others, and so simply by being ourselves, we are

almost certainly impacting everyone around us, even if neither we nor they are aware of it. And I don't know about you, but I find this idea both amazing and a little unnerving! Perhaps I'm subtly influencing you all to give up your coffee and become tea drinkers, or one day I might succumb instead and start needing a morning latte!

But caffeine preferences aside, we always talk about being Christ in the world, how we are the physical embodiment of Jesus when we love God and live into our faith, but I think we might not be aware of just how much we can easily have an impact. People are curious about each other. We want to know what drives each other, what we are passionate about and why, we love to observe the behaviours and language of the people around us, and mould ourselves in response.

I think this is why in both our Gospel reading and the one from the first letter to John, the word 'abide' comes up so many times. To abide is to dwell, to remain, to be immersed, to be in accordance with. And what is it we are to abide in, or with? Abide in love, abide in God, and God the Father, Son, and Spirit, will abide with and within you. It's a mutual indwelling, a circle that we build

our lives on. If we do this, then God and love is what we will naturally nurture others in.

It will affect how we are - perhaps we refrain from engaging in negative conversation, perhaps we stand up for someone else, maybe we search for ways to help others through volunteering, it could be our passion for working to protect the world we have been entrusted with, it could be our gift for working with youth, our ability to make coffee for others to enjoy, sharing with our children the ways you serve the church, it could be in inviting your next door neighbour to attend evensong or the Oyster Roast, it is in being gracious, in giving thanks for each other, in forgiving when we are hurt, in modelling love for all people, no matter who they are or where their life has taken them.

Perhaps we feel the wounds of others, and know that we are not just individuals in our own separate worlds, but that we are community, that our own wellbeing is connected to that of the other people we share our street or city or workplace or school with. These are all examples of the fruit we can bear if we are letting our faith shape us and take precedence over our own small and self-oriented impulses.

So our abiding has a deep impact on ourselves and on others. Our abiding in God, abiding in love, makes us who we are. So does love grow here? Does love grow in your heart? Does it show? We all are nurturing each other, even in the small moments, in ways we don't even know of.

So think of who has influenced you, and how they did it. How the small encounters and conversations can be profound. Be encouraged in wondering how you can continue this dance, weaving your own thread into the tapestry. Abide in love. Abide in God. And we will bear the fruit of nurturing each other in faith.

Amen.