

Scripture Readings from Sunday 29th April

Text: John 15:1-8

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

1 John 4:7-16

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

I Am The True Vine

The writer of the 4th Gospel loves these “I AM” statements where he connects Jesus with Yahweh, the personal name of God that God gave to Moses at the burning bush.¹ Last week we considered, “I AM the good shepherd” in John 10.² Elsewhere in John we have, “I AM the bread of life,”³ “I AM the light of the world,”⁴ “I AM the resurrection and the life,”⁵ and “I AM the way, the truth, and the life.”⁶ All these are bold and provocative statements, which together with other “I AM” sayings in John reflect how he understands the identity of Jesus the Messiah and his intimate relationship with God the Father. Last week I also mentioned how these statements do not simply reveal *who* Jesus is but who he is *in relation* to others; if Jesus is the Good Shepherd then *we* are the sheep that hear and follow his voice. In today’s gospel reading Jesus says, “I am the true vine.”⁷ And just as the picture of a shepherd had links with Old Testament imagery, such as in Ezekiel 34, so does the audacious claim, “I am the true vine.” In various places in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is depicted as a vine with God as the Gardener.⁸ For example, in Psalm 18 we read it was God who brought the vine out of Egypt and planted it in the Promised Land. Usually, however, those Old Testament references are ones of lament, in that the vine has produced sour fruit, or is now degenerate. The disciples would therefore have been very aware of this metaphor. Moreover, since vines were very common in Palestine, the agricultural practices around growing them would have been very familiar to Christ’s followers and to John’s readers.

In saying “*I AM the real or authentic vine,*” Jesus is claiming, in some mystical way, to be representative of Israel. God’s covenant with Israel is going to be realized through Jesus the Messiah, through his teaching, deeds, life, death and resurrection. God is picking up those fading hopes of the nation of Israel and going to do something new in and through Jesus that is in line with prophetic expectations.

Jesus also affirms the Old Testament image of God the Father as the Gardener or the Vine Dresser. Vines, if left to their own accord, become a tangled mess, wasting energy by being unproductive. They seasonally need pruning to allow the shoots to grow towards the light. When the divine Gardener prunes the plant, he is helping it to be its true self and to be all of that which it is capable. Indeed, in those days it was well-known that for the first *three* years you kept vines well-pruned and there was no expectation of fruit. Moreover, when Israel’s enemies destroyed their vineyards, everyone knew

¹ Exod 3:14.

² John 10:11, 14.

³ John 6:35, 51.

⁴ John 8:12; 9:5.

⁵ John 11:25-6.

⁶ John 14:6.

⁷ John 15:1, 5.

⁸ For example: Ps 80:8-18; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10-14; Hos 10:1. Indeed, the vine became a symbol of the nation of Israel; it was the emblem on the coin of the Maccabees. And coins minted during the brief period of the Jewish revolt against Rome in A.D. 68-70 were stamped with the image of a vine.

they were ruining livelihood's that took many years to establish. So times of peace were only meaningful if they lasted long enough for vineyards to be re-established and become fruitful again.

Jesus then said, God the Gardener "cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."⁹ Consequently, just as in the Old Testament, there is an element of divine judgment for those branches that are fruitless and of divine providence in caring for those pruned branches to become even more fruitful. Both experiences are painful! But note that, at some point, *all* the branches will experience the pruner's knife.

Who are those fruitless branches? One way to look at it is to think of those Jews who refused to listen to Jesus and to accept him and his message. Israel had forgotten that the vine which God had planted and tended did not exist for *itself* but in order to provide fruit for the Gardener. But, more generally, since *Jesus* is the vine, John's message must be applied to those people *within* the Christian faith community that do not bear fruit in love.¹⁰ Christians who's Christianity consists of reciting a profession of faith, but whose lives do not live it out. The criterion, in this metaphor, is simply *fruit*. Those branches with no life in them must be cut off. But note that the *Gardener* himself undertakes that responsibility. Dead vine branches were considered the most useless of all woods, as it could not be used for anything else and was only fit for burning. That's a sobering thought!

The Father also does the pruning of *fruitful* branches, so they can be even *more* productive. Jesus then reassures his disciples that are "already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."¹¹ There is clever word play in the Greek here, as the verb for "pruning" and "cleansing" has the same root as the word for "catharsis." Consequently, whatever the pain and suffering results from God's pruning is to be seen as *cleansing*. Nevertheless, since God will determine which branches are to be cut off and which ones are to be pruned, there is – from our perspective – an element of mystery to these actions.

The intent of the message that Jesus gives his followers, or John his readers, was surely *not* to fill them with anxiety. Rather it was to emphasize the interconnectedness of God the Father, Jesus the vine, and Christ's followers the branches - which includes us. In a sense, the branches can be relieved of the anxiety concerning their fruitfulness! That is the work of the Gardener. Because God is the Vine Grower, there is always hope. True life is always possible because the Vine Grower gives life and constantly sustains it. The reassurance that Jesus then gives his followers, particularly in the context of his upcoming death, is given in the following command, "*Remain* in me, as I also *remain* in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must *remain* in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you *remain* in me."¹² The word "remain," traditionally translated as "abide," is repeated eight times in just three verses! I've been told that the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine; understandably, this is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. Moreover, the fruit of the *vine* that Jesus mentions is the life of Jesus *himself* reproduced in the lives of the disciples in the midst of their life in

⁹ John 15:2.

¹⁰ See John 15:5-6.

¹¹ John 15:3

¹² John 15:4.

the world. Nevertheless, the warning is clear: if the church does not remain in Christ, it will be powerless and fruitless. This should stimulate critical reflection in our many churches today and of us within them. In what ways might we be connected or disconnected from the true vine? Does God consider my community to be fruitful or not? What needs to happen for each church community to produce a bountiful harvest?

Important though such discerning deliberations are, our one task to abide in the vine, which involves living out the message of Jesus in love and obedience.¹³ But, take courage, says Jesus, because the abiding is *mutual*; as we continue to abide in Jesus, so his Spirit will abide in us.¹⁴ Consequently, where there is mutual abiding, there is *always* the prospect of fruit! Incidentally, Jesus being the authentic vine not only means that he represents Israel, but our abiding in him means that we do as well!¹⁵

There are a number of practical things for us to note today. First, although Christians often talk about salvation as being is once for all time, John's emphasis here is clearly in the active word "abiding." Remaining in Jesus is a continual act; it is a constant putting to death of the old ego and that is continually a renewed action of the will. In other words, "remaining in Jesus" means all our *thinking* and *doing* is an outliving of this active, Spirit-filled, mutual-indwelling.¹⁶ I believe strongly in free will as being both genuine and as a part of what it means to be made in God's image. Moreover, I believe that God *cannot* override human free will. Remaining in Jesus is, then, an active, living choice. God can't force us to do it! But the Holy Spirit will help us, *if* we ask.

Second, this emphasis on the communal and relational nature of the Christian faith challenges our Western worldview, because our lives are constructed largely on the modern idea of a sovereign individual. We live in a society that promotes independence, individualism, self-expression, and making something of yourself. Although this is some validity to this, self-worth often becomes equated with our *own* personal success since we are so focused on self-determination. It can too easily become all "up to us" and our own resources as we try to solve life's daily challenges. The temptation for us to "go it alone" is very great today. In this vine metaphor, Jesus is warning his disciples *not* to try and "go it alone." If they do so, they would be cut off from their life source and they would bear no fruit, becoming a branch that would be cut off and die. What this means is there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We *can't* go it alone; God doesn't *want* us to go it alone - he made us for community that is connected to Jesus, the vine, and a community of intertwined branches. The Hebrew concept of *shalom* means peace and wellbeing with God, each other, and the natural world. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals that community, beings-in-relationship, is even an integral part of the divine life.

¹³ See John 13:34-5.

¹⁴ See also 1 John 4:13.

¹⁵ See also Romans 11:17-24.

¹⁶ Paul doesn't use this same vine image, but he expresses the same idea when he says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20) and "I can do all things in him strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

The writer of the first letter of John has the same emphasis on “abiding.” Listen to parts of today’s reading again, and hear the echoes of the vine imagery:

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God *lives* in us, and his love is perfected *in* us. By this we know that we *abide* in him and he *in* us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God *abides* in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they *abide* in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who *abide* in love *abide* in God, and God *abides* in them.”¹⁷

In addition to the stress on “abiding” the *evidence* or *fruit* of that “abiding in God” is love – which is a big theme in John’s gospel too. This is *not* a sentimental “All you need is love” from the Beatles, but a potent love that is even willing to suffer, a love that took Jesus to the cross. That’s “tough love”; love in action, a love that rescues. In the context of the Vine grower, God’s love both prunes *and* saves.¹⁸ This kind of fruit was not evidenced by the perpetrator of the heinous act in Toronto this week, but it was present in those who brought the carnage to an end, and by those who gave aid to the injured and dying. That was “tough love” too. The fruit of love, which our complex world desperately needs, arises from abiding in Jesus the vine. The writer of 1 John puts it this way:

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love*. God’s love was *revealed among us* in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might *live through him*. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son. . .”¹⁹

This well-known saying is both rich and profound, and far from simple or sentimental. Let us, therefore, abide as the branches of the vine, tended by the Gardener, and confidently trust God to continue to bring forth fruit. AMEN.

¹⁷ 1 John 4:12-16.

¹⁸ “Saving” (salvation) and “cleansing” are connected concepts, along with “healing” and being made whole.

¹⁹ 1 John 4:8-10a.