

## Sermon – Jesus the true vine - Sunday 2 May 2021

Acts 8.26-40; Psalm 22.25-31; 1 John 4.7-21; **John 15.1-8**

As my Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... (v9)

Today I will be alluding to some of Achdeacon Paul's sermon – well worth a listen to/read if you can – and keeping in mind how the story of the Eunuch in Acts shows us how fruit comes from telling others about the good news who are seeking to receive it but aren't aware they are – and also the call in John's first letter to see love as an action – a verb in John's first letter where we are reminded how Jesus commands us to love others as he loves us....

We pick up the story in John's Gospel immediately after Jesus has given instruction on how to become one of his disciples and we hear one of Jesus' seven I am statements using the imagery of the vine – an adaptation of the Old Testament imagery for Israel.

The number seven also has significance – seven represents completion – appearing over 700 times in the Bible - from the seven days of creation in Genesis, to seven churches in the Book of Revelation. In John's Gospel there are seven signs, seven feasts, seven references to Jesus' final hour, seven personal testimonies, and seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus using imagery of bread, light, door, shepherd, way, truth and life – and the true vine.

The vine can depict celebration as in Psalm 80 where God 'brought a vine out of Egypt; drove out the nations and planted it; cleared the ground for it' – and for background - there needs to be a certain correlation between climate, soil type and terrain – collectively known as the Terrior - to produce the best quality vineyard that will yield the best quality vines.

In verse 1 Jesus declares 'I am the true vine' with God as the vine-grower. His disciples – all of us – are the branches. We are given a clear order of flow. It is God himself who tends the vine and who prunes the branches for abundant fruitfulness, knowing just how much to prune and how much light and shade the fruit needs to flourish and grow... We, the branches, abide in the Son and are cleansed by the words of Jesus – cleansed by the Word which *is Jesus*.

When we inwardly digest the Word – when we take the words of Jesus - into ourselves – into our hearts – we are being cleansed – our whole thinking and attitude becomes that of Jesus.

This vineyard story is about intimacy, abiding and love – love being the fruit of the vine.

But the vineyard stories in the other Gospels focus on violence and greed – echoing the old testament references from prophets like Isaiah in his 'song of the vineyard' that laments that, despite the care with which God has planted the vineyard, watered it, tended it and protected it, the fruit has been a great disappointment: 'when I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?' Jeremiah too - 'I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?' Israel – the vine – are choked by thorns and weeds of being lured into the worldly quests for power, greed and self-seeking at the expense of others.

When Jesus talked about the vine, it would have made immediate connection with the people of ancient Israel. It was a symbol, a metaphor that was deeply ingrained into their psyche and all that goes with the branches that do not abide – are not connected to the vine - are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned.

Jesus is saying that he is the vine – the new Israel – that will produce finest fruit and wine that will save, transform and make glad hearts through all who follow him and live through God's Holy Spirit in his name.

The first 'I am' saying in John's Gospel is Jesus' claim 'I am the bread of life' – in chapter 6 – and here in chapter 15 – 'I am the true vine' – the cup that saves – the bread and the wine holding together the mystery of salvation – the terrior of the kingdom – conditions are blended and abiding together to create the perfect conditions for the perfect harvest – the harvest of love, peace, justice and harmony.

Abiding is really important for John – this is a mutual indwelling of the Son in the Father and the Father in the Son. We are part of that indwelling as we abide in Jesus, and because of that abiding in Jesus, we therefore abide in the Father. This fulfils what Jesus declares earlier in the Gospel: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.'

The Father is then glorified by the bearing of much fruit - The fruit of the vine is love – and if Jesus is the true vine as we are told, then Jesus himself is love. The key themes of fruitfulness and abiding seem to say that without abiding there is simply fruitlessness. By seeing things this way, what also comes to light is just how dependent we are on the grace of God through Jesus to enable us to bear fruit and love as God would have us love – and how the power of the Holy Spirit working through us in the name of Jesus Christ makes that possible.

It seems painful and pointless sometimes as we struggle and grapple to let go of old ways and old ideas that prevent us from having courage to be pruned and refined – removing those parts of us that will not bear fruit of love for ourselves or those around us. The Greek word means 'to clean out' – we are called to clean out in order to flourish – whether it be the Church of England as it prunes and cleans out past attitudes and actions relating to abuse, racial injustice, discrimination – whether it be local diocese and parishes cleaning out ways of ministering and administering that don't promote flourishing and good harvest – or whether it be ourselves and some of our ways or attitudes that prevent God using us in the best way he can -

Something else that becomes clear is that while we bear fruit through our Christ-like living, the fruit that we – the branches bear - is not for our own consumption. The fruit – the love – that we grow within ourselves is harvested for the good of others – but the good news is that the mutuality of such a love means that as we feed others with our own fruit – so they in turn feed us with theirs – we nourish others with our loving and are nourished ourselves in return.....

What can one bring – what can one offer and share – how can we commune as one - is the key to the fruitfulness – the love – in John's Gospel. So what does this say to us today?

Perhaps it is saying that the more we pray to abide in God and in each other and collectively abide in the one body of Christ we can intercede for our community and the wider world as Jesus intercedes for us in the power of the Holy Spirit – that being pruned by the gardener God so that we can abide in the vine of the Son and reap the fruit of the Holy Spirit of love – and that the prayers, petitions and actions we offer and live out come from a place of true bumper-harvest potential – AND I will talk more about that in the notices – watch this space!

Jesus says 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you' – 'If you keep my commandments – we are told - you will abide in my love. ...so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'

Completeness then, is found in the joy of discipleship – abiding in and following Jesus – doing our best – going the extra mile – knowing that we are being energised through the true-vine energy of the vine that is tended by God the creator of all goodness and love – and joy....

Do we – you and I - truly know that joy and completeness within our own discipleship – are we bearing fruit abundantly – and furthermore are we sharing that abundance? Are we extensions of the vine, pruned by a gardener who wants us to abide deeply and share and receive love deeply?

These are questions we should keep coming back to so that we can stand as a parish working together in a way God wants us to play a part so that we can connect and engage with those who are yet to hear about the good news of a love of God – a love that is lived out through the fruit of the vine, revealed daily through the work of faithful human hands – and human hearts....

Let us too be pruned so that we might come to know – and become - the way, the truth and the life of Jesus, the true vine... that way of peace in a troubled world and in our sometimes troubled hearts.

WE PRAY: We are here, O Lord, for you, the vine, to nourish us. May we, the branches, draw our strength from you, and grow in harmony, unity and love. May we find nourishment through our rootedness in the life, teachings and love of Christ. Receive the fruits of our worship and be glorified. Amen