

## John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes<sup>Ⓜ</sup> so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> "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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

### Jesus the true Vine.

Last week we looked at one of Jesus's 'I am' sayings in John's Gospel, and we follow that by looking at the last of these – 'I am the true vine'. Jesus said this while talking with his disciples in the upper room at the table for the last supper. It was his final great statement about who he was, and is another statement that pulls together lots of imagery from the rest of the Bible. Last week, thinking of the Good Shepherd, we talked about sheep and shepherding and saw that this was one of the major symbols of the Bible. But almost equally vines and vineyards have been a repeated image of Israel – in blessing and in warning.

In the Old Testament vineyards always symbolise Israel. So for example: Isaiah 5 contains the song of the vineyard, Psalm 80 includes the line 'I brought a vine out of Egypt', and in Genesis 49, Jacob's blessing on Joseph speaks of him in terms of a rich vineyard. In Jeremiah 2 and Hosea 10 both compare Israel with a wild vine.

Deuteronomy 32 connects the condition of the vineyard with sin. If the grapes are rotten, it is because the vines have come from Sodom and Gomorrah – quite the scathing remark! And then many passages warn of the destruction of the vineyard: for example Isaiah 5, Isaiah 16, Jeremiah 5, Jeremiah 12, Hosea 2, Amos 4, and Zephaniah 1.

While the prophets mostly warn of the destruction of the vineyard, or other nations stripping the vines of their grapes Jeremiah 31 and Amos 9 offer the opposite – hope of blessing and restoration.

I cite these so that you get a sense of the extent of vineyard imagery in the Old Testament. If Jesus then speaks about vineyards there is absolutely no doubt that his listeners knew what he is talking about.

Jesus talks of vineyards in three main places – there are the workers in the vineyard who receive equal reward for differing duration of labour; there are the tenants in the vineyard who kill the landlord's son, and then there is the passage we read today, where Jesus says that *he is the vine*.

Overall, there is a marked shift – it is no longer Israel that is the vineyard, but the Kingdom of God. But there is more. When Jesus says that he is the vine, he is saying that Israel could never really produce good fruit on its own. The vines were always going to rot – the wine would never make the grade.

If we remember the wedding at Cana, near the start of John's gospel, we remember that the master of the feast had already served good wine, but it had run out. The new wine Jesus produced was better than anything before it. This new wine of Jesus was the first 'sign' in John's gospel, and it provides the reference for the last 'I am' of the same gospel.

So – Jesus is the vine, and his Father is the gardener. Jesus is the vine, the disciples are the branches – growing fruitfully out of the vine. The Father, the vine-grower, prunes the

branches to remove anything unfruitful and to encourage more growth. The gardeners amongst us will know pruning at the right time encourages more fruitfulness than if things were left as they were. So God is active in his world, in his vineyard.

Now, think of the context – Jesus gives this speech at the last supper. At the end of the evening, a disciple will slip out, on his way to the authorities, to betray Jesus. And Jesus knows it. He speaks of pruning the vine in the presence of this ‘bad branch’ that will be cut off. (Mind you, he also washes his feet along with the rest, and shares that supper with him – what an act of grace!)

When Jesus talks of pruning, there is a pun going on – pruning and cleansing are the same word in Greek. So ‘every branch that bears fruit he *prunes* (or cleanses) to make it bear more fruit. You have already been *cleansed* (or pruned) by the word that I have spoken to you.’ The abrupt change from pruning to cleansing makes much more sense when you know it’s the same word throughout.

How are we cleansed (or pruned) by his word? I think this is because we have heard the truth, the gospel, and now know right from wrong; because Jesus has blessed you and guided you.

Jesus goes on to speak of abiding, or remaining in him. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. In a way it makes perfect sense – a cut off branch, one that has no connection to the vine, withers and dies and bears no fruit. But what do we understand that connection to be? What do we do? We abide in Jesus through fellowship, loyalty and obedience. Start on a different tack, walk away from the ways of Jesus and you are literally cutting yourself off from Jesus and his Kingdom. We do really depend on Jesus to be fruitful.

How then can Jesus remain in us? Jesus remains in us through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, but also through the way that we are shaped by all our reading of him and thinking of him, and praying to him.

There is actually a further New Testament reference that uses very similar imagery. In Romans 11, Paul talks of grafting branches into an olive tree as a way of talking about gentile Christians becoming as much organically a part of Christ as any other branch.

We have seen that Israel in the Old Testament is repeatedly represented as a vineyard, and the vineyard is God’s Kingdom in the new. We have seen that Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches who must remain in him if we are to be fruitful. But what is the point?

The point of a vineyard is wine! Wine is a real pleasure, it makes life taste good, it brings people together in joy, it is a symbol of fellowship, it is an aspect of the good life. We are supposed to bear fruit that brings genuine goodness and joy to the world. We should make everything tastier, everything more pleasurable and be an undisputed blessing.

We want that to continue to be true, and so we want to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in us – those qualities that are good qualities, whatever faith you bear, but which are particular signs of our remaining in the true vine, and Jesus remaining in us. What fruit is growing in me?

What fruit is growing in you?

Amen. SDG.