

Easter 5 – Wesley & St Aidan’s – 3rd May 2015

Theme: Jesus says, “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower.”

Reading: John 15:1-8

Introduction

Today’s Gospel has the seventh and final ‘I am’ saying of Jesus. This metaphor had strong links with the Hebrew Scriptures and was a fundamental image for the Israelite people as they settled in their own land. Vines were a sign of a settled life, but Jesus uses this image to both strengthen and warn his disciples of what is to come for them in the new faith community, which came to be called the Christian church. Hence as we come towards the traditional time where the early church is seen to be formed, at Pentecost, we reflect back to some of Jesus’ earlier teachings that add immensely to our understanding of church today. Last Sunday we examined Jesus’ statement “I am the good shepherd” and today we build on that with Jesus stating “I am the true vine” and explaining aspects of that.

Reflections on the reading.

Left to their own devices, grape vines go wild, trailing and attaching themselves to other things and become one tangled mess. Not much fruit is resulted in as all energy goes in the spiralling vines. A vinegrower or vinedresser is needed to keep the vines in order. The paradox is that the vinegrower must cut away lifeless, unproductive branches AND prune those branches that are productive to produce a better harvest the following year. At some point, ALL the branches will need to be pruned to some extent. Even young vines are not allowed to produce fruit for the first few years. This means drastic pruning is needed each season if the plant is to develop to its potential. Vineyards then, are long term investments and labour intensive.

Jesus is the true vine, God is the grower/vinedresser and we are the branches. This metaphor of nature is both powerful and implicitly challenging when linked to the Christian community and to ourselves. Right from the start we recognise that we will be pruned, whether or not we are bearing fruit. If we are not bearing any fruit we will be cut right back. However, even if we are bearing fruit we will be pruned so we can bear even more. It sounds a little painful in whatever way we are pruned.

The punch line comes in John 15:4/5

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

The Greek word for ‘abide’ or ‘remain’ depending on the translation, (*meno*), has a range of meanings including ‘staying in place’, ‘enduring’, ‘holding out or onto’ – all implying the steadfastness and reliability of God’s presence in and for God’s community. God’s care is constant and whatever pain or suffering results from God’s pruning and cleansing is redemptive rather than arbitrary.

We know that John’s community was in a precarious position – their choice to believe in and follow Jesus made them suspect in the eyes of the established religious authority and subject to possible excommunication. Community was everything. To be cast out – homeless, landless, family-less, was the ultimate shame and fate. John’s community is struggling to redefine community, given the reality and impact of Jesus on the lives of people who believed in him.

If we stay with the vine metaphor in the context of John's reality, we find a comforting picture. God is in control as the vinegrower; the vine and the fruit of the vine are gifts of God. In the Old Testament, Israel saw itself as a vine planted and cared for by God. However Israel often disappointed God because it failed to be fruitful in the sense of communal, compassionate and focussed on justice. Jesus, being the true vine, offers hope if we stay connected through the way we live with Him and through accepting the cleansing God has in pruning the unproductive areas of our being.

The Greek word '*kathairo*' is translated as prune or cleanse and carries a sense of making pure or free from blemishes or shame. Interestingly it is the same 'root' word used in the foot washing scene in John 13 where Jesus acts as a servant washing the feet of the disciples. Hence being connected to the vine, Jesus, calls us to be a servant to others.

What a passage of Scripture for us today!!

The reading and reflecting upon it evokes questions of faith, community and productiveness.

How are we connected to the true vine – Christ?

Is ours a fruitful community or do we need more cleansing/pruning?

What fruit does our community produce?

During communion, as we drink of and from the vine, it is good for us to use this time to ponder these questions and the imagery of the vine, the vinedresser and the fruit. The vine imagery is about discipleship and community over the long haul – like a good red coming from aged vines and then well-aged. We need to keep connected to the vine, Christ, else we will end up going our own way and losing contact with our spiritual strength and the one who nourishes. Also stay closely connected to those who spiritually nourish us in Christ and bear fruit - this is the call of the Gospel today.

Bruce Prewer wrote the following called "Pruning".

'Grape growing is not for wimps, it requires tough pruning decisions; a costly willingness to wound and amputate limbs of the vine; in order to stimulate and shape it towards the better fruit and wine.

God reads a season's potential, fights pests, weeds, mildew, supports productive branches and severs fruitless fears; Grace is as free as sun and rain and as hard as shears".

I leave you with a further question to ponder:

What needs to continue to happen for our church community to produce a more bountiful harvest?

Let us pray.

Loving Lord, apart from you we can do nothing. With you all things are possible. Graft us into your true vine, inflow us with your resurrection sap until we become aligned with your direction and destiny. When the fruits have been picked, our leaves fall and autumn comes with a chill wind, help us to accept whatever pruning back is needed for your glory. In the name of Christ through whom all things are possible. Amen.