

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 5th Sunday of Easter ~ Sunday 2nd May 2021

Our Gospel reading for today (John 15: 1 – 8) has another one of Jesus' 'I am' statements. Those challenging statements that tell us who Jesus really is. Once again Jesus is using a metaphor that his followers would have easily understood. The symbolism of the vine is one that had become a great symbol for the people of God - it was even used on some of their coinage. So, when Jesus says, 'I am the true vine' (v 1) he is both identifying himself with God, the great 'I am' (remembering when God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3:14). Jesus was also telling his followers that he is the true vine, the vine of God, and that it is by being connected to him, as intimately as the branches of the vine, that salvation comes. Jesus is telling them, and us, that he is the true source of life as the Son of God.

Throughout history, humanity has sought salvation in many different places. Many of the Israelites assumed that salvation was theirs, as a birth right through their father Abraham. But Jesus reminds us of the promise of God that we can all become children of God, by receiving the one sent by God, and believing in his name. In John 1:11 - 13 we read 'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God'. It is not where we are born that matters, but that we accept the truth of the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. That acceptance connects us to God through Jesus. He is the true vine and we are the branches if we believe and have faith in him.

Our belief and faith give us life. The life that God intends for each of us to live, a life lived in all its fullness, bearing fruit. This life is only possible when we are intimately connected to Jesus. As Paul told the Athenians (Acts 17: 28) 'For in him we live and move and have our being'. We may seek other ways of giving our lives meaning. I am sure I am not alone in having sought validation in places other than through Christ. But it is in him, and through him, that our lives find their true significance. It is in him and through him that we experience spiritual growth and bear fruit.

Jesus reminds us several times in this passage, that to have a fruitful life we must remain in him. If we allow ourselves to be separated from Jesus then we too, will be like the branches cut from the vine, we will wither and die. Remaining in Jesus is not a passive process. Like all relationships, our relationship with Jesus needs work. Remaining in him means continuing in a real and living relationship with him. Developing and deepening our relationship through prayer, study and worship, in order to be the person that only we can be. We can't help but bear fruit when we abide in him. Just like the vine doesn't have to strive to produce fruit. When it is connected to the vine, God gives the growth.

When we think of bearing fruit through our relationship with Jesus, we might think of the fruit described by Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5: 22 – 23). The fruits of the Spirit being love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That fruit that undeniably enriches our own lives and those of everyone around us. But remaining in Christ can bring other fruit. It is only by remaining in Christ that we can help to bring others to live in the knowledge and love of God through Jesus Christ.

Another aspect of remaining in Christ is to be connected to other Christians. God has created humanity to live in relationship with each other. As we all know, relationships are not always easy, but by remaining in Christ and being connected to others who also remain in Christ, we can build relationships that can transform communities. When we work together, in Jesus name, then our efforts are multiplied greatly. The hungry are fed, the naked are clothed and the imprisoned are set free.

But vines, as you know, do need to be pruned periodically if they are to continue to produce fruit. When I lived in Warwick my neighbours opposite planted vines in a sunny spot at the back of their garage. My neighbour was one of those people if he decides he is going to do something, he researches it and then follows the combined knowledge of his subject to the letter. Over the period of a couple of years, I was able to see the development of his micro vineyard. The planting and the feeding, the training of the branches across the wall, the first leaves and flowers and then the first tiny crop of grapes. But then after that first crop came the pruning. It looked quite savage, these fragile looking vines that had given out a tiny crop cut back so severely that I thought it would die. But then the miracle happened, the next year, the growth was much more luxurious, the leaves bigger and brighter and then in September large bunches of perfect black grapes. My neighbour had done his research, absorbed the collective wisdom and then acted on that wisdom to produce spectacular results.

In the beginning of our Gospel passage, Jesus reminds us that if he is the vine then God is the gardener. God in his infinite wisdom, cuts back all the things that are holding us back from a fruitful relationship with God the Son. That pruning can be painful. Whether the pruning involves unhealthy habits or relationships. People or places that are holding us back from a relationship with the God of love. God knows what is in our hearts and cuts back the hard-outer husk that we sometimes grow on our hearts to protect ourselves. God opens us up to be able receive the Word and to allow the Holy Spirit to do miraculous work in us. Jesus promises us that the pain will be worth it. In verse 2 Jesus tells us that God “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”. God doesn’t want us just to produce a tiny, insignificant crop. That is what life in all its fullness is all about. God has created us to produce a bumper crop of fruit to the Father’s glory.

So, I think our challenge for today is are we going to allow God to prune our lives from all anger, bitterness, impatience and criticism. To remove the dead but oh so familiar, comfortable branches of ourselves that will never bear fruit. To be prepared to bear the pain in the short term to allow our expert gardener to coax us into becoming as fruitful as God have been created to be.

In the front garden of the vicarage there is a bush that appeared to be completely dead. The bushes around have been sprouting green leaves or blossom, so I was tempted to get Pete to dig it up but this week it has started to bud. Tiny little buds that promise so much more. It reminded me that no matter how dry and lifeless our spiritual lives may feel. No matter how little fruit we feel we may have produced. Jesus is not finished with us and reminds us all that there is still time for life in all its fullness. Jesus said “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples”.

Amen