

Fruit

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

You could get pretty scared when you read this gospel passage.:

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

John 15:6

Jesus is clearly very serious about the matter of 'abiding in him'; and the reason for is that we need to be part of the vine in order to bear fruit. And we need to bear fruit because a vine has no other purpose. Jesus goes on, in a passage we will hear next week, to speak of the importance of love. We will conclude that this is the 'fruit' he speaks of. And of course this would be in line with everything else we read in the gospels and indeed in the letters of Peter, Paul, James and John.

In the passage we have heard today, Jesus is less concerned with what the fruit is and far more focused on how to grow it. And there seem to be two horticultural strands to this advice: 'abiding in him' and 'pruning'. So I want to say something about each one. This is a kind of spiritual *Gardeners' Questions Time*

Lets begin with the abiding in Jesus. I suppose if we were to look at this image we should note that if grapes are to grow the branch must be properly attached to the vine and the vine must be properly rooted in the soil so that all the necessary nutrients can be absorbed. This is a parable for our own human lives. If we are to love our fellow men and women – and this we are commanded to do – then we must absorb the right nutrients. From the little I have read about growing plants I know that they need nitrogen and phosphates. The human vine needs two nutrients as well: the power of the spirit of Jesus and the knowledge of what love looks like.

The knowledge of what love looks like comes first of all from the life of Jesus. When we read the gospels we read of a man who is honest, who favours the poor and the outcast, those who are on the edge of society; a man who can be very critical of those who have power; a man who makes

himself available but still takes time to recuperate, to refresh himself for further ministry; a man who, in the end, obeys God and gives his life for the cause because that was what he is called to do. He lived a life of love and he showed it in a dramatic parable when he washed his disciples feet:

'You too must wash one another's feet'

John 13:15

he told his disciples.

The writings of the earliest Christian leaders give a good deal of attention to how we should treat other people. Even the author of the letter to Hebrews, otherwise preoccupied, with weighty theology about priesthood, ends with very practical advice:

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering... Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have

Hebrews 13:1-5

Hebrews is not alone. Paul writes to the Ephesians

be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:32

John does not mince words about those who are hypocrites:

Those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars;

1 John 4:20

So this is the knowledge of what love looks like. This is the fruit that we are called to bear.

But achieving that is no longer a matter of dogged determination alone. It was when we were Jews – but no longer. We now live by the Spirit. And

this is the point of Jesus' image of the vine. We gain the power to live a life of love from being in the presence of Jesus himself. There are so many ways of being in the presence of Jesus. One is stillness and silence. That is one of the reasons this church is open to the public in daylight hours – because we need spaces where we can be still, spaces where stillness is normal. But to the stillness we can add reading about Jesus in the gospels. This is quite different from the kind of reading I spoke of earlier. This is not head knowledge. This is heart knowledge. This is reading slowly, reflectively, listening to what the Spirit says to me through the life and words of Jesus. This cannot be rushed. And then we can add the sacraments – after all Jesus did liken himself to a vine and a vine does produce grapes and grapes are made into wine! And then we can add our fellow Christians. At our best we build each other up, we encourage each other in a life of love. We show each other love; we encourage one another to act in a loving and generous way. Paul recognized this as happening when he wrote to the Thessalonians:

encourage one another and build up each other,
as indeed you are doing.

1 Thess 5:11

But there is always a risk when human beings are involved. There is always a temptation to encourage the wrong attitude, to encourage gossiping, running people down, picking fault with other people. We know that many of the early church did just that because on numerous occasions Paul had to rebuke them! This is not simply not bearing fruit, it is bearing thorns, prickles – all that we do not want in the garden. And Jesus was quite brutal about this:

My father...removes every branch that does not bear fruit.

John 15:2

It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit to remove from me and you all those unloving attitudes. It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit to make us Holy. But the Holy Spirit need us to be willing for this to happen. There is a well-known prayer that goes

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

But sometimes we are not ready for this kind of commitment. One of my colleagues gave me an alternative which began like this:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I cannot accept,
And wisdom to hide the bodies of those I had to kill
because they got on my nerves.

The work of the Holy Spirit will begin when we are ready. The work of the Holy Spirit will begin when we have no more excuses. Jesus once asked a sick man, 'Do you want to be well again?' It might seem an absurd question. But the reply was neither a 'yes' nor a 'no'. It was a list of excuses as to why for thirty-eight years he had not been healed.

Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.

John 5:7

I imagine Jesus must have thought for some time before he gave a simple instruction, 'Take up your mat and walk'. And the man did. He chose to respond. Like that man we may have many reasons why we cannot love one another. Many excuses. And Jesus response is to wash our feet and give us a new commandment:

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34-35

N Clews
29th April 2018