

## John 15:1-8, I am the Vine

02 May 2021

Father, we thank you for your word to us. We ask you now to help us to hear you, to let you speak to our hearts and direct our lives. For your name's sake. Amen.

I think if I had to choose just one or two passages to illustrate the Christian life, this would be one of them. It seems to say it all in a nutshell.

As I was preparing this sermon, I was sitting outside in glorious spring sunshine, with, all around me, the whole world bursting into life and new growth. The change from day to day is amazing. My son has a wisteria growing under his office window, and he has been astonished at the rate of growth. He keeps trying to cut it back, but it keeps on pushing up over his window. Indeed one cheeky little bit is now pushing its way *into* the window, through the tiniest gap! You can almost feel the sap rising in the trees and it's really quite exciting watching the way everything is suddenly growing, emerging, blossoming, sprouting! That life force pulsing through every growing thing. The power of the creator at work under our very eyes.

So this is a very appropriate time of year for us to be reading these verses about Jesus as the Vine. He is the true vine, he tells us, and we are the branches. Jesus himself is rooted in the Father; we may not see the roots, but we do see the vine above ground in the person of Jesus. As we commit ourselves to him, we become his branches, we become the way that this vine produces fruit. Imagine that! Jesus, our vine, relies on us, his branches, to produce his fruit in the world! Jesus tells us that he depends on us to produce the fruit that will bring joy to the world. Jesus the vine takes in rainwater through its roots, and feeds us, the branches; we then produce the grapes which can be turned into wine: it is *this relationship*, the relationship between the vine and the branches, the relationship between Jesus and us, that turns water into wine. That is surely something to think about.

When we read the Bible, we find many references to bearing fruit, especially in the New Testament. Anyone who has grown fruit knows that it involves work. The plant must be fed and watered, and pruning is often necessary to produce more fruit. At my age, I take comfort from the fact that with blackcurrants, the fruit doesn't grow on the new wood, but on the old wood! And you might know that with strawberries, you're not supposed to take off the crop the first year when the plants are very young, but allow them to mature and grow on before asking too much of them. That might tell us something about how we nurture our young people or new Christians in their faith, not demanding too much of them before they are ready.

And what is this fruit referred to in our New Testament? One of the finest passages is by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, ch.5, where he speaks of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Quite a list! I used to have them stuck on my kitchen unit, as a reminder. These are clearly virtues that we might all aspire to, but we can't produce them in ourselves, by ourselves. They have to be allowed to grow out naturally from the vine itself, through the power of life and love that flows out of Jesus into us if we are dwelling in him, or abiding in him.

I suspect we have all come across people, Christians, who are sometimes referred to, rather unkindly, as po-faced saints. These are good people, folk who have often been brought up very strictly, who try to obey all the rules and never stray from the straight and narrow. They can be very devout in their religious observance too. But they can be rather joy-less. They can make Christianity seem very unattractive, dull, and sometime even oppressive. I think these are branches that are trying to produce fruit without being attached to the true Vine. They are trying to make it all happen by themselves. They have not grasped what it means to remain in Jesus, to abide in Him, to dwell in Him. We have different words for this, each striving to help us understand just what this means.

How do we remain in Jesus?

It's wonderfully helpful to have this image of the branch attached to the main vine, growing out from it, fed by it. That's what our relationship with Jesus is supposed to be like. We don't try to go anywhere without Jesus! We live our lives attached to him, in our thoughts, in our prayers. We don't just nod in His direction and then carry on with life 'as normal'. We don't just turn to Him in emergencies, but we share each day with him. How can we do that, when many of us have busy lives and little time to ourselves?

Well, I recently read about a priest whose whole life had been changed by heeding some advice given by Mother Teresa. She said, start every day, when you get up, by saying out loud 'Good morning, Jesus!' That is a simple way of recognising that the day ahead belongs to Him, and of acknowledging that you will go through it with Him. It doesn't mean that you will be thinking of Him all the time, but it sets your direction for the day, it shows that you want to live that day for Him, and you are asking Him to live in and through you, in all that you have to do. It's a good start. Just thanking God at mealtimes can also help bring our focus back to Him.

Clearly our deliberate times of prayer are also a way of abiding in Him, sharing our life, talking to Him about our joys, our sorrows, our concerns, listening for what he might be saying to us. And He will often speak to us through the Bible too. I have been sending out the readings for each week, focussing on the Psalms and the Gospel readings mostly, because that is where we will often hear God speaking to us. And it is that *daily* reminder of God's word dropping into our ears and our hearts that helps to keep us abiding in Him, letting him shape us from within, so that what comes from us is good fruit, fruit of the Spirit.

At the moment, we cannot meet and share as we like to do, but that is another way of abiding in Jesus: listening to each other as we share our experiences, our doubts, our hopes. Home groups are particularly helpful. A time and place where we can be open and honest about our faith or lack of it.

So how might you more consciously abide in Jesus this week? What might He be asking of you? By their fruits shall you know them, says Jesus. What are the fruits of your life? Do they point to Jesus? Someone has said that the fruits of the Christian life should be seen in our character, our conduct and in converts – not bullying others into belief, but them being attracted to Jesus by what they see Him doing in us, by His life live in us.

How might you renew your relationship with Him today? He is always there, always waiting, always ready to send the power of his Spirit and his life coursing through your veins, transforming you into his likeness and bringing forth in you the fruit of His Spirit. Amen.