

SERMON: I AM THE TRUE VINE

JOHN 15: 1-8

At the bottom of our garden we have been fortunate enough to inherit 11 apple trees of differing varieties. When we moved into the property, the Rectory, I didn't know what to expect of these trees. They were obviously well established and quite old, but they needed a good pruning. Would they bear any fruit? I wondered.

Well, the autumn came and we had so much fruit, so many apples, that we were giving them away as fast as they grew, leaving boxes of them on the road for people to take and making lots of apple pies. Anyway, one year I decided to try and prune the trees, which badly needed doing. I took advice from the College gardeners, who advocated a gentle pruning, which is apparently favoured now rather than a harsh cut back. I spent a very satisfying morning with my secateurs, cutting away. Then stood back to view the work. On the ground were a lot of twigs and branches and the trees looked like they had had a serious haircut.

Worried that I might have overdone it a little, I wondered if the next year there would be any sign of life at all. I am happy to say that the trees all blossomed and bore more fruit.

Now, I don't know much about grape vines, but if you listen to Gardeners' Question Time on Radio 4, you will know that they are high maintenance. I have never tried to prune one, but Jesus's analogy that he is the vine and we are the branches is a familiar

one and I have always been quite comfortable with the idea that we abide in him and grow and bear fruit. But, as I re-read the passage this week, I was struck by the phrase 'He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit', just as the wood that I cut off from the apple trees made a lovely bonfire (once I had poured a lot of petrol on top-please don't try that at home!)

In order to be connected to the main vine of the plant, the bad rotting grapes, or the withered vine branches have to be cut off, so that the rest may grow. As usual, I am a little troubled by Jesus's words of exclusivity, always fearing that I am one of the bad branches that needs to be cut off and burned. However, I am somewhat comforted (in v.3) that Jesus says to his listeners that they have already be cleansed, or cleaned up (the same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing, so the meaning is consistent here). They have been cleansed by the word (the logos), which in John's gospel is Christ himself of course (in the beginning was the word) as well as the spoken word. Thus, the words to the disciples become words to us the reader: you cannot bear fruit unless you are connected to Christ. So, what kind of fruit are we talking about?

Well, anyone who was in my confirmation class last Sunday will know that we are told by St. Paul in Galatians (5: 22) that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control: and that's not by any means an exhaustive list. If people can see virtues like these in us, then that is a sign that we are dwelling in God and he in us. Henri

Nouwen also reminds us what bearing fruit means in our personal relationships:

“Fruits ... come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another’s wounds. Let’s remind one another that what brings us true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness.” – Henri Nouwen

It is this notion of family, connectedness and belonging that makes the theology of the vine metaphor so powerful and so important. We are the family of God, we are all connected to each other as God’s children and as the body of Christ on earth. But, no one will even know if we are Christians if we do not show signs of fruit, if we are not patient and kind, gentle and faithful, and show love and joy and peace. In order to bear fruit that we need to recognise Henri Nouwen’s wisdom that it springs from vulnerability, shared brokenness and our wounds.

Moreover, we break apart our own family if we do not show love for each other, as God loves us. If you hate your brother or sister, John says, it’s a sure sign that you’ve somehow become disconnected with God.

Of course, we all fall short of these ideals every day, but let us seek to stay connected to Christ, through prayer, thought and action, and with the assistance of God’s Holy Spirit, for those who abide in Him and He in them bear much fruit. Amen.