

Jesus: “I am the true vine”

John 15:1-17

If you read John’s gospel, you can be in no doubt that Jesus claimed to be God. He repeatedly claims it and assumes he can be like God. In all seriousness, C.S.Lewis says Jesus is either self-deluded, mad, or he is what he claimed, God become human, living among us, dying on the cross in our place for our sins and rising again.

So when he says to the Jews of his day Before Abraham was I am, they were quite right to think he was claiming to be God. But he is God, so he was not blaspheming but telling the truth.

Last week, Darren spoke about Jesus saying I am the light of the world, two weeks ago, James spoke about John 14 where Jesus states I am the way, the truth and the life. There Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples that his going away is good for them. They couldn’t grasp the bigger picture. They didn’t understand that Jesus going to his death would bring salvation nor that he was going to rise from death (even though he said he would). He goes further to explain that not only is he planning for them to be with him in heaven but he is sending his Holy Spirit to be with them everyday of their lives.

Now, John 15, he moves on to speak about how his relationship with his people will develop.

You need to understand a simple clue in the text, the end of chapter 14 Jesus says “*“Come now; let us leave.”*”

Jesus and his disciples were in an upper room celebrating the Passover. Now they leave the upper room and make their way through the crowded city and out of the gates, which were open as it was a festival.

In 18:1 it says

1 When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it.

the Kidron is a valley running north south on the eastern side of Jerusalem. So chapters 15, 16 and 17 record the conversation on that walk out of the city. In all probability, they passed a vine growing on the side of one of the houses or a vineyard on the slopes of the valley. Jesus starts with what his disciples are familiar, vineyard culture and teaches from there his relationship with them and us.

If you are a gardener of any sort, at this time of year there is a lot of cutting back and tidying up to do. The question is always how far to cut plants back so that you get flowers or fruits next year or maybe just to make them look nice like trimming a hedge. What is critical is how you do it and it depends on the plant and how it grows and fruits. I was in the gardens at Osterley last Monday and stopped to speak to two volunteers beavering away in the beds cutting back the dead and dying foliage. We immediately had a discussion about how and when to cut back roses.

If you live in the Mediterranean region that discussion would have centred on vines and olives. Jesus is about to go into an olive grove but this morning we are doing vine culture!

I am no expert but I am told that vines are pruned back to the basic branches, all the side shoots and leaves and other bits are cut away. As in all gardening it seems by the end you have overdone the job, there is not much life to see.

Jesus then takes this commonly known culture and says
“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

I want to break this down a little.

First as we have seen, Jesus is using the term “I am” with special significance. He is the “I am” . He is God.

Secondly he is the vine. He is not the vineyard owner running a load of vines for profit. He is the vine. He is about to talk about the church, but it is not a crowd of people but he himself. Paul uses the analogy of a body . In 1Corinthians 12:27 we read

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

The church that Jesus envisioned was himself replicated all over the world and you and I are saved, redeemed, given new life and transformed by the Holy Spirit to be like Jesus. It is not an organisation, a building, an institution as the church has been twisted to mean, It is Jesus revealed to the world through his people.

Thirdly, He is the true vine. This reflects his statement in the upper Room when he said I am the way, and the truth and the life. He is the truth. He is the true vine.

If you want to understand truth you have to know Jesus. This passage says if you want to live you need to be connected to Jesus.

Fourthly, God the Father is the gardener. A serious reading of John's gospel will always leave you wondering how you separate out the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They are one and yet different. Here we are reminded that God is deeply committed to the church and wants it to be the best it can be. And best in this case is quite simply, most fruitful. *He 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.*

So lets be clear, this church is here to bear fruit. You are saved to bear fruit. A pruned vine looks bare and ugly but the gardener knows that will result in new growth and fruit in the future. So welcome to a not-so –good looking community! We are not here to be beautiful but to bear fruit. Bluntly if there is no fruit, God has not begun the work of salvation in your life. If there is spiritual life in you, expect God to prune you to produce better and more fruit.

Before you panic about whether or not God would cut you off, please note Jesus immediately follows up with *3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.*

You wouldn't be cut off if you have truly put your faith in Jesus,

However, there is still the challenge. “Am I bearing fruit?” because this passage and others quite clearly state that you are here to glorify God by producing fruit. Fruit contains the seed of future generations. We are commanded to go and make disciples of all nations. It should be in the DNA of the church to reach out and tell the Good News. Even in a Pandemic. Not spreading a virus but sharing eternal life. That is our mission, that is our destiny. How we go about that is quite simply to be so hooked up to Jesus that his life shines through us, his words become our words and our families, our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues hear the Good News from us.

If that is not happening, we need to pay attention to this passage because the problem lies not in the speaking up but in the connection to Jesus.

If we are to be effective we have to be walking with Jesus, living the Jesus life.

There are two bits of word play going on here.

Pruning is described as cleaning. So God wants to prune you means God wants to clean you up. Get rid of what is not healthy and fruitful.

Secondly, we say, vine branches are trained so that they spread out well. Some of the work of the Holy Spirit is to train you in godliness.

Jesus then says:

4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

The word remain obviously is important here. The primary meaning of the Greek verb is to stay, to live in the same place. Jesus is calling us specifically to stay connected to him.

Unlike the vine branch, we have a choice. We can remain connected or we can try to move off and live our life our way. Jesus says that is a doomed course of action. If a branch of a plant breaks off of the vine it dies because its vitality comes from the vine. Its like all your electronic gadgets you have. If you want them to work successfully, you have to charge them up regularly. Your electric kettle does not work unless you plug it into the mains electricity and switch it on! That seems obvious but is it as obvious to us that if we want to be alive spiritually, we must remain connected to Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit is not possible without us abiding, remaining or staying with Jesus. Some people can imitate the fruit of the Spirit, some have personality traits which imitate some of the fruits, but real fruit has to come from a direct line connection with Jesus.

What does that mean in practise? Well first we must be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Secondly we must seek him constantly. When you came to Christ you were asking questions as to how to become a Christian, you were invited to pray in repentance and faith and receive forgiveness. But that is only the beginning. Praying and receiving are part and parcel of every day life or ought to be.

How and when you do that very much depends on your lifestyle. When I was teaching , I would snatch a few minutes with God in the mornings and find time later in the day, once the children had gone to bed to further connect with my Saviour. When I was pastoring, that changed and I was able to set much more time aside in the morning in particular to worship, pray and hear God's word.

If you have to drive to work , you can spend time in traffic, communing with God. If you are digging in the garden, washing up, you can converse with the Almighty. You can turn the TV , ipad, etc off and pray. One prayer which we should constantly pray is "Fill me with your Spirit, Lord, that I may bear the fruit you desire."

Jesus said

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

There is a stark choice here. Stay with Jesus and you bear much fruit. Be apart from Jesus and do nothing. Where are you today?

Probably you are thinking, I'm not sure I am bearing much fruit, but I want to bear more fruit. Good! You are in the right place. But we are not to wallow in our misery, we are to turn from our disconnectedness, the sin which so easily clings to us and turn to Jesus just as we did when we came to Christ. That is what we call repentance. And repentance carries both actions, turning away from sin and towards Jesus.

Get plugged in to Jesus!

There is a serious warning here. Jesus is the true vine and he wants you to bear fruit. So God is at work trimming off anything that takes away from the process of bearing fruit. Submitting to the Lordship of Jesus means praying the Lord's prayer. Let me remind you what Jesus taught us to pray:

*Our Father, who is in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.*

We are taught to pray that **God's kingdom should come**. In our lives, our fellow Christians lives, and in the pagan godless people around us to whom the kingdom is irrelevant. If we seek the kingdom for others then we have to have it for ourselves. That means being fully connected to the vine – Jesus.

Your will be done includes allowing God to prune us, to clean out the things we think are important but he thinks get in the way of our witness.

Forgive us our sins is conditional on us letting go of the offences that others have done to us. To be hooked up to Jesus means forgiving as he forgave. He forgave you all your sin so is it too much to forgive a few sins (less than 490?) to be like him?

And deliver us from evil. That means delivering from the evil that surrounds us and the evil within. Darren pointed out last week that the problem is we like sin. We have to resist and cry out to God for deliverance from the sin which besets us especially the ones we like.

Jesus says:

6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

He is talking about the vine. Vine branches have no value except to grow fruit. They provide no wood and they don't make a fire on their own. If you are not connected to Jesus, you are as if you are dying. Your spiritual life is withering and you need to turn back to Jesus.

But

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Your prayer life will become much more exciting when you are connected to Jesus. You listen to his voice and echo back what he wants as prayer requests. And you see what he wants and therefore what you want happen.

Then Jesus adds an amazing statement:

8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The God of all creation believes that you bearing fruit is one of the most wonderful things in the universe. Our salvation is the crowning glory of God's work. It is centre stage in Heaven. It is what the angelic host rejoice in.

Now Jesus changes key.

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

We are to not only remain connected to him but also to remain in his love.

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

The number one fruit God wants to see in our lives is us loving each other. And not just being nice to each other but loving as he loved. And his love was sacrificial. Remember they have just left the Upper Room where his disciples were arguing over who would be the greatest. They are about to desert him, Peter will deny him. Most of them only got together after his resurrection. Yet he loved them, argumentative and weak-willed as they were and he lays down his life for them and seeks them out after the resurrection to be with them. He says to them love another as I have loved you.

There is so much in these verses but time does not allow us to explore this further but it would be good if later today you picked up your Bible and read this passage again meditating on what God wants to do with you.

If you want some headers here they are

Love

Joy

Servant / friend

Chosen

The Father gives

Notice that Jesus returns to the point that The Father gives you whatever you ask when you are bearing fruit.

So being a school teacher I am setting you homework!

Talk to him about surrendering your life to Jesus so that God can prune those things that are no good for bearing fruit. Remember Jesus desired us to bear much fruit. That is the Father's objective. Jesus is the true vine and his Father is the gardener.

The challenge is to *Remain in me* and to *remain in my love*. If you have never actually hooked up to Jesus then now is the time to do it. Turn to him, turning away from selfish desires and sin and ask for forgiveness and new life. Then believe that salvation is all of grace. Once you have asked Jesus to be your Saviour and Lord, you have new life, you are hooked up to the Vine, you are born of the Holy Spirit and are on your way to heaven.

Live like it!

Ask God to do the pruning that leads you to be a fruitful part of the vine. Pray and hear what God has to say in his Word and obey his command. And you will be fruitful because God knows what he is doing. As Philippians 1:6 says:
being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.