

Homily 28 April 2024
Easter 5

Winterbourne Stoke 10 am Communion
John 15: 1-8
Acts 8: 26-40

Abide in me as I abide in you.

I am the True Vine

This is the 7th of the I AM statements of Jesus. Having preached on the Good Shepherd last week, (John 10:11-18) I have been struck by the intensely relational aspects of these sayings. The shepherd can only be a shepherd because of the sheep, the vine is only demonstrably a vine because of the branches that produce its fruit. We, both sheep and branches, are created by the universal creator, because he wants us and loves us.

This point alone is enough to make us think, and wonder with awe at the honour and esteem in which God holds us. And in the next moment– we realise how UN worthy we are. But let's explore further...

Jesus was addressing these words to his disciples at the Passover supper. As they passed the cup of wine around they no doubt reflected on the special relationship between God and his chosen Jewish people, in which they were included. The vine was an analogy for the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible and the disciples will have known Psalm 80 which refers to God bringing the vine out of Egypt, planting it in a new land, tended and cared for it so it grew deep roots. They may also have remembered Jeremiah's reference to how degenerate and wild the offshoots of this precious vine had become, and how the people longed for the Lord their God to restore their health and vitality. Had they thought on such things, and it is likely that they would have done so given how steeped in tradition and history the Passover season was, the disciples would have recognised their unworthiness and their need for God's forgiveness, grace and cleansing.

Of course the evening had begun with Jesus washing their feet – note Jesus washing THEIR feet. We are quite used to this image now but then it would have been considered outrageous and completely the wrong way round. It focused the disciples on THEIR unworthiness while Jesus washed them.

SO into this scenario Jesus speaks these words.

I AM The True Vine.

He is the one planted in a new land that points to the vine grower – His Father - who removes branches that don't yield fruit, even if they are considered part of Him, the chosen ones.

Yet, even the healthy and obedient branches get pruned – which is the same as being cleansed and purified, – so that they grow better. This puts the feet washing in a different light doesn't it..

Being lopped and being pruned look, and must feel, similar at times – another thing to reflect on. How do we know the difference? Today's is not a sermon with all the answers!

In the field by our house are a lot of trees, many of them pretty old and some of them look quite rosey to be honest. Yet, they continue to produce fruit year after year – they are standing rooted in the soil and being fed by the water of life.

There are also branches which have been felled by storm, or lightning, or negligence. In the first year, these branches surprise me rather as they also continue to produce leaves.

Sometimes in the second year too.

However, eventually, the leaves become dry and the twigs brittle. The detached branch may *look* as if it can continue without the main trunk of the tree but it cannot. Even a branch partially separated from the main tree will eventually wither and die.

The difference may not be obvious to begin with but if the branches are not fully attached and feeding off the same energy source as the tree, it certainly will not bear fruit and will eventually die.

And then the farmer comes along and burns them.

It is such a powerful reminder of the importance of abiding in God, and His creative life giving energy source.

It is like a battery charger! Without being plugged into the right source of energy, and regularly recharged, the battery will become ineffective and die.

So to take this analogy further, how do WE stay abiding in HIM, remaining plugged into the source of our life and energy? For without this, without Him, we can do nothing.

We need be intentional and do this by regular prayer, studying God's word and accepting HIS grace and forgiveness again and again. We need to be filled with HIS spirit which energises and inspires us, as well as filling us with the love of Jesus and desire to be like Him. We also need to produce fruit.

ARE we producing fruit and if so, HOW do we do so and what does this look like?

Jesus says, IF you abide in me, and my words abide in you, my Father will be glorified, and you will bear much fruit and BECOME MY DISCIPLES.

Becoming His disciples is the key thing. A disciple emulates their master, aims to be like him and act like him.

And how did Jesus act? He loved. He forgave. He pointed to His father, and spread the good news of the Kingdom of God to all he met.

There we are then. That's what he meant by bearing fruit – we are to be like him, 'fulfil the love command' as one commentator put it. And then there will be fruit...

Jesus' teaching on the true vine is, however, both an encouragement and a warning. It is not enough to just intend to be like Jesus.

We also need to be obedient. We have to DO IT. Good intentions are not enough and do not produce the fruit that God wants. We may intend to be kind but forget, we may intend to spend time in prayer and getting to know God through Jesus but run out of time. If we do not do these things, we may lose the connection, the abiding, we need to flourish – and may miss out on bearing the fruit which identifies us as disciples and points to Jesus as God's son. We have to DO as well as think about it!

Look at Philip.

The angel spoke to him (and Angels DO speak to us although they may not fit our expectation of one! More to discuss!!) - told him to go - and he went.

Bizarre, inconvenient perhaps, but he went. And then The Spirit told him to go to the chariot. Philip, was clearly in tune with the spirit in order to recognise him speaking.

And then the miracle occurred. An Amazing time of sharing, of *joining in* with what the spirit was already doing (NB), of reading the scripture and telling the Ethiopian what he knew and had experienced of Jesus. And another disciple was made.

This is fruit surely, borne from an abiding in the True vine.

I wonder what this means for us, as individuals and as a church. How can we be more like the one who offers the peace which is beyond all understanding. How can we love as he loves us?

What does abiding in Him mean for you, for me, this week and in the future.

Can we recognise times of pruning in our lives, and be encouraged that this pruning albeit painful in the short term, helps to purify and cleanse our relationship with God and with each other? Or are we in danger of being lopped and burnt....

Let's remember the image of the fruit laden vine, and also of the branches which have become detached from the tree and slowly die, and resolve to be plugged in to God, abiding in him and in his spirit and, in his strength become effective disciples doing love, kindness and grace wherever we go.

Lets keep a few moments of quiet as we ponder these questions and intentionally abide in Him