

# Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021

*Acts 8.26-end; John 15.1-8*

The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of St John's gospel contains some key teaching about what it means to be a Christian. In just 17 verses we read and hear how Christian spirituality is designed to work. In the system of allocating bible readings to Sundays, the full passage is spread over two Sundays, this Sunday and next. That means that preachers get 2 goes at it, but the flip side is that worshippers don't necessarily hear the whole piece in one go, which is unfortunate, because it is of a piece.

Today we have the first 8 verses, which contain the wonderful, living allegory of the vine and the branches. I am the vine and you are the branches, says Jesus. Without me you can do nothing, but abide in me and you will achieve extraordinary things. The image is that of the divine life of Jesus flowing through the Church and individual Christians bearing the fruit of the Kingdom of God. It means that being a Christian does not start from trying ever harder to live a good life, but from drawing close to God, to Jesus; and by implication to one another. I am the vine; you are branches; without me you can do nothing.

It's heart-warming stuff, but there is sterner stuff in there too. Firstly, there is the pruning. As gardeners know, the purpose of pruning is to make the whole plant more fruitful; to encourage growth that is more fruitful, rather than growth that just takes up more energy and space. Here the image is of God as the gardener, gently but firmly, lovingly, pruning away the parts of the plant that are a distraction from the plant's real purpose in bearing the fruit of the kingdom. The message is that Christians and churches need to allow God to do this, but often we don't. It's painful and we don't like the cuts. But pruning is an integral part of this whole image of the vine. If we are faithful we should, really and truly, be welcoming the pruning.

Then Jesus doubles down on this sterner teaching. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away and withers. This part of the image is best understood as referring to churches rather than individual Christians. God never throws people away; he never gives up on any of us. But he does throw churches away, which are withering because they are no longer really joined to the vine, or which are spiritually diseased, or which are resisting necessary pruning, which are not bearing fruit. And sometimes branches that have just withered have to be cut away so that they do not infect the whole.

More widely as a result of the pandemic, there is a lot of pruning going on in businesses and people's lives. I am certainly not talking here of the tragic losses of life, or of the lost dreams and livelihoods, or of those suffering from the long term effects of the virus. Rather I am talking here of the ways that people and services and businesses are adapting to the new realities. The challenge of course is to work out what to prune and when to do such pruning. The dangers are that the wrong branches are pruned, or withered branches are left to drain life from the rest for too long.

This is challenging stuff indeed, and churches are not exempt, but here the image of the vine in John chapter 15 comes centre stage. It is God who is our gardener, and it is Jesus who is the true vine. Our call is simply, first and foremost, to faithfully abide in the vine and the

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rest will become clear. But what does it really mean to abide in the vine? It is a fine image, but what does it mean in practice? Here we need the second part of the reading that we will officially read next Sunday.

For what Jesus goes on to say in John chapter 15 is that abiding in the vine is about abiding in the love of God. The sap, the life, that flows from the vine to the branches is nothing less than the love of God, and this what gives life to the branches. The love of God feeds our souls, heals our souls, bring life to withered branches, and then it bears fruit in love for others, in love for our Christian brothers and sisters, and for those in need whoever they are. Christians learn to love better because they learn to know better how much they themselves are loved by God. Divine love is the source of the life of the whole vine, the energy that makes the whole vine strong and fruitful, and often it is the unloving bits that have to be pruned.

And so the whole passage concludes with Jesus' commandment to his disciples to love one another, in spite of all our faults and failings, because this is how God loves. The whole image of the vine and branches in John's gospel is actually all about love. In summary Jesus is saying, I am the true vine, the true source of God's love for you, and you are the branches. Without my love you can do nothing, therefore abide in my love, and then you will bear in abundance the fruit of the kingdom. Amen.

CJ. 02.05.21