

St Brandon's 28 April 24

The True Vine

I am the true vine, says Jesus in some of his final teaching before he goes to the cross. It's the 7th and last 'I am' saying in John's gospel and perhaps the most all-encompassing. Today we'll explore why and look at several verbs in this passage- **remove, prune, abide** and **'bear fruit'**.

For those first disciples gathered with Jesus the *vine* was of course a familiar plant, whose fruit produced wine each year in local abundance, but it also held great spiritual and religious significance, because the image of the vine or vineyard is repeatedly used in the Hebrew Scriptures. Psalm 80 v8 describes Israel as 'a vine brought out of Egypt, planted by God'. And Isaiah 5 speaks of Israel as a vineyard on a very fertile hill, but yielding only *wild* grapes.

Jesus uses this image in his prophetic parable of the tenants in the vineyard, who refuse to listen to the owner's servants and eventually kill the owner's Son. Here, instead of the vine producing wild grapes or tended by lawless tenants, Jesus himself is the true vine. It's a clear statement that Jesus is the true Israel, the Christ or Messiah, for the true vine will produce true grapes- fruit that will last. We'll think later about the nature of this fruit.

But first let's tackle some other verbs, for without them there will be no fruit! Firstly, and I was very tempted to skip over this, Jesus says the gardener '*removes every branch in me that bears no fruit*'. For horticulturalists, this makes perfect sense – you remove the dead wood to clear space for new, healthy growth, to stop dead branches blocking the light from the growing plant.

In spiritual terms the gardener, Father God, knows every one of the branches and will not allow any that break off or disconnect from the vine to endanger the health of the others. Please note this is the gardener's job, not ours, quick as we are to make judgements about others. And we know that God does not cast away anyone who seeks him but is full of compassion and mercy for all his children. Nonetheless, we

need to hear the warning that dead wood will be removed and thrown into the fire... and stay connected to the true vine.

Secondly, another tricky verb – **prune**. Pruning is painful, but healthy. The branches the gardener prunes are the fruitful ones, in order that they may be even more fruitful. v.3 tells us that we have been pruned because of Jesus' word to us - that is the word of life, as we have accepted Christ and allowed him to be Lord of our lives, so he has pruned and cleansed us; the words for 'prune' and 'clean' are very similar in Greek.

Allowing, even welcoming God's pruning in our personal lives and as a church must be part of our healthy Christian experience. I usually think of pruning as cutting out mature wood, but it's also needed for the fresh young shoots which need to be 'nipped in the bud'. In the vine, small side shoots bursting with life seem fantastic but they use up precious nutrients and so limit the vine's ability to bear fruit, which takes patient, careful nurture through the seasons, there are no short cuts in fruit growing.

Tom Wright comments on these verses:

...though it always hurts, we must be ready for the father's pruning knife. God is glorified, and so will we be, by bearing good quality fruit, and lots of it. For that to happen, there will be extra growth that needs cutting away. That is an intimate process. The vine-dresser is never closer to the vine, taking more thought over its long-term health and productivity, than when he has the knife in his hand.

Our third verb is **abide**: in order to bear fruit, we must abide in the vine.

Abide may sound almost whimsical (*Abide with me*, goes the old hymn) but it's rich in meaning. It's also translated 'remain' – stay where you are, wait, be patient – 'bide your time'... The Greek verb is '*meno*', which is also in the previous chapter, John 14, as Jesus talks about the many 'abodes' or 'rooms' in his Father's house – from the verb *meno* comes the noun *monai*, the Latin *mansio* and our word mansion: *In my Father's house are many mansions...*

So to *abide* is about where we live, where our home is. And The Message translation of v.4 reads:

Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.

'Meno'- 'abide', stay close to Jesus, as closely as the branch is attached to the vine: *meno* occurs 10 x in these few verses and it's two –way, if we live in Christ, he lives in us. And then we will bear much fruit. If we live in Christ and his words live in us, whatever we ask, because it will be in the will of God, will be done for us.

It's vital to stay closely attached, intimately in touch with Christ, so that other distractions, pressures or priorities, however important, do not loosen that connection. How we need daily times of quiet, prayer, Bible reading, intentional awareness of God with us, so that we abide in him. Removing, pruning, abiding all enable the true vine's purpose of **bearing fruit**. What might this fruit be, for St Brandon's?

As we approach Pentecost in just 3 weeks, we're aware of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – those qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control which make such an impact in all our relationships,. In our neighbourhood, workplaces, families, friendships... They are the characteristics of Jesus, the fruit of his life flowing out through us. But let's be sure we bear good fruit from the true vine, and never sour grapes from a different source...

Our church group reports for today's annual meeting are full of good fruit, enjoyed and appreciated by church and parish. If you haven't yet read them, please do, and stay for the visual presentation at coffee time and in the meeting – and there will be some grapes to eat as we watch!

*To conclude- I'm reminded of the **great vine** in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace.*

It has grown and flourished for almost 250 years, and produces on average 600 large bunches of grapes, or 250 kilos, a year...

It's an awesome plant!

My friends, the St Brandon's branch of Christ's vine has been here much longer than that, being tended and pruned by God, bearing fruit through the generations, in times

of plenty and poverty, sunshine and storm, even fire. As that process continues today, we commit ourselves to abiding in Christ, the *true vine*, that we too may bear much fruit.

Let's pray:

Lord you are the vine and we are the branches

Keep us abiding in you and prune us clean

That we may bear much fruit to your glory Amen.