

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

THE VINE

2nd Sep 2018

John 15:1-17
Galatians 5:22-26

Having been all tied together during the children's talk, you know what we are thinking about when we read about Jesus saying, "I am the vine." And we know that it need not be a grape vine that we use to illustrate what he was talking about. An apple tree would work just as well, or a plum. Either way Jesus is saying that he – and that God – because remember that these I Am sayings remind us that Jesus is talking as God – is the life force that flows through his servants and which holds us together.

My apples are doing very well this year. As are most people's. When I met Ross Noble this week, he was urging me to admire the tree in his and Jean's front garden – and you should. It is like an illustration of an apple tree from a children's picture book. It would be great to be able to think of ourselves as those red and round apples, bursting with health and goodness.

But of course, we can't do that, because in his vine picture Jesus didn't say that he is the vine and we are the grapes, he said that we are the branches. We are the branches, each one growing out of the trunk, or out of another branch, but all reaching upwards and outwards, and all, crucially, with the life of the vine or the tree flowing through them. It is a very simple analogy. When a branch is not connected to the trunk, it withers and dies, and if it doesn't fall off by itself, it has to be removed for the health of the whole plant. So, as we saw earlier, it is the life of God which holds us together as his people and his church.

If you grow a fruit tree – or even try to grow a vine – Kate McMahon has one which is doing well this year, she tells me – the reason you do it is not just for the sake of having something structural in the garden, or even for the sake of any blossom it might produce in the spring. You grow a fruit tree, ultimately, in the hope of getting fruit from it. As with any other cropping plant, you look forward to the harvest. Jesus says that the branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains connected to the vine – which is horticulture 101 – and he says that his Father is glorified when we bear much fruit. But he doesn't define what he means by the idea of fruit.

We are not the fruit – we are the branches – so the fruit is what we are supposed to produce; what we will naturally produce if and when we stay rooted in Jesus. It is seen in our characters, for, as St. Paul reminds the Galatians, the fruit of God's Spirit is love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Now that is easy to say, isn't it! And it is often fairly easy to see in other Christians. If you look round you today at the people here worshipping with you, you will see people in whom you know these qualities. If you find it harder to see these qualities in yourself, remember that there are probably people here this morning who when I invited them to look around and see, saw you and saw the fruit of God's Spirit in your life and character!

So yes, the fruit that we are to bear is found in our characters. But that is not the only fruit. When a plant bears fruit— a vine or an apple tree or almost any plant – the plant is not thinking about filling the tummies of human beings. OK, the plant is not thinking at all, but you know what I mean. The plant’s purpose is not to feed us – that is a by-product – it is to spread its own kind over the face of the land. When we do not harvest them, fruits drop to the ground and burst open. The seeds in them either sink into the ground or are taken by birds to another place, where they sink into the ground. And in the ground, they grow and they begin to form another plant, just like the parent. And that is the purpose of fruiting, to spread the life of the plant. It is our purpose as a church, as branches rooted in the vine. If we bear fruit it should mean that the church spreads and grows and more people become connected to God through Jesus. If that is not happening then all our love, joy, peace and so on is not doing what it is meant to do – it is not changing the world one person at a time.

Jesus said “I am the vine” very near the end of his life and ministry, and he said it to his followers. Some of his other I Am statements were made to crowds or to religious leaders in dispute, but here he is with his disciples, at the last supper before his death, and to them he gives this vision he has for his followers, that they will be rooted in him, and grow and spread, going deeper and deeper into his love and spreading wider and wider across the world. Subsequent years and centuries have shown that this is what has been happening – and what is still happening. Sometimes we can get very caught up with our own particular weed-strewn patch of ground in which the seeds in the fruit have a hard time rooting, but we should not forget that Christ’s vine now spreads across the world and is still growing and spreading at a tremendous rate – in Africa and Asia and south America in particular. It is spreading by God’s people keeping rooted in him, allowing his love to flow thorough them and reaching out in practical love to those around them. Jesus was not just giving us an idealistic picture but describing a model that works.

It works, though, as he said, only when the branches – that’s us – remain attached and rooted to the vine. It works only when we stay connected to Jesus. A couple of weeks ago when I told you about the parlous state of our national church, after the service, someone said to me “We need a good strategy.” And that may be true, but what I was thinking was that before that we need to make sure that we are rooted to Jesus. If we are not abiding in Jesus, letting his words abide in us then we will not have his life in us and strategies will not revive us. We need to think deeply on his words, like “Love your enemy and pray for those who hate you.” Or “You cannot serve God and money.” Or “Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.”

In this church, as we seek to move forward and tread a path of renewal, and as we seek to come closer to each other by uniting our congregations to served God across our parishes together, we must never let anything be more important than being connected to Jesus, to God’s life and love through Jesus. Nothing is more important than that we think on Jesus words, letting them abide in us, which means find a home in us. Nothing is more important than that we come to him, asking for what we wish for ourselves as his children and for our neighbours as his beloved. Nothing is more important than that we let these priorities motivate us into reaching out with love to those who need to know God. There are many in our disjointed society who are alone and yearn for connection – not knowing that the most fulfilling connection is with God through Jesus.

It may be that we need a strategy to work together here in this place as well as across the nation, but first of all we need to abide in Jesus. Then we will know what we have to offer others. Then when we pray for guidance in how best to serve God in this parish, we will be more likely to see with the eyes of Christ.

This church and our denomination is at a turning point. We can continue to do things as we have been doing them, without thought about why or about whether it is the best way to serve the God to whom Jesus connects us, or we can abide in Jesus and with that security, take a good look at the challenge of bearing fruit in our land.

When we come together today around the table, we will, as always, be offered bread and wine. Jesus said that the bread stood for his body, broken for us in death, and the wine stood for his blood. In Jewish thought the blood was the life force as without blood there was no life. The cup of communion reminds us that Jesus blood was shed and his life was given up for us, but as we take it, we are also reminded that his life is within us and we are united to the very life of God through Jesus. Today as you take the cup, whether you opt for the large cup or the small gasses, think about what it means to be connected to God through Jesus. Think about what it means to abide in him. Think about what it means to have his life within you, and pray that you and that together we may bear the fruit that he longs to see. Amen.

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