

## JOHN 15.1-17: I AM THE VINE

[preached at Chelmsford 8 November 2009]

### 1. JESUS OFFERS LIFE

*“Life”, wrote Alan Bennett in ‘Beyond the Fringe’, “is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We are all of us looking for the key. And, I wonder, how many of you here tonight have wasted years of your lives looking behind the kitchen dressers of this life for that key. I know I have”*

Is there more to life than getting up in the morning, going to work, and then going to bed in the evening? According to the 18<sup>th</sup> century French writer, Nicolas-Sebastien Chamfort, *“Living is a sickness from which sleep provides relief every sixteen hours. It’s a palliative. The remedy is death”*.

While one American wit declared: *“Life is an eternal struggle to keep money coming in, and teeth, hair, and vital organs from coming out”*.

Jesus, by contrast, was much more positive. Jesus believed in living life to the full. **“I have come”**, he said, **“in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness”** (John 10.10). So many people simply pass the time of day – they exist, but they do not really live. Jesus by contrast wants us to discover meaning, direction, fulfilment, joy – a life which does not fade with the passing of time – a life which not even death can destroy.

This is what all the so-called **‘I am’** sayings we have been looking at this autumn are about – they are about the life Jesus offers. Listen to them again:

- **I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty (4.35)**
- **I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness (8.12)**
- **I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved (10.9)**
- **I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep (10.11)**
- **I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die (11.25)**
- **I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me (14.6)**

Each one of them is a promise of life. For, Jesus is the ultimate life-giver.

But, if we to experience that life, then we must be in a relationship with Jesus.

The life that Jesus offers only becomes ours as we enter into a relationship with him, a relationship based on faith and love.

This is the context for the final great **‘I am’** saying of Jesus.

In John 15.5 we hear Jesus saying: **“I am the vine and you are the branches”**.

What a strange metaphor, you may feel. What on earth was Jesus going on about?

The key to the metaphor is found in John 15.1: **“I am the real vine”** (GNB), **“I am the true vine”** (NRSV; NIV). As the adjective **“real”** or **“true”** makes clear, Jesus was making a contrast. He is **“the real vine”** over against another vine.

And the vine in question was Israel.

You have to appreciate that just as a bulldog has been a symbol of Britain, and an eagle a symbol of the USA, so centuries ago a vine was a symbol of Israel.

- Jewish coins in Jesus' time had the stamp of a vine on them.
- Inside the great temple of Jerusalem there was a massive golden vine with grape clusters hanging from it – a symbol of Israel.
- In the Old Testament Israel was often pictured as God's vine or God's vineyard. But, as the prophets pointed out time and again, Israel failed to be fruitful. The prophet Isaiah, e.g., wrote: **"Israel is the vineyard of the Lord Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted. He expected them to do what was good, but instead they committed murder. He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice"** (Is 5.7-5).

It is against this background that Jesus said to his disciples **"I am the real vine"**.

As he said these words, Jesus was seated around a table with his disciples.

They had just celebrated what we now call the Last Supper.

During that meal he had taken a cup of wine and said: **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"**. I.e. through my death

- God was establishing a new relationship based no longer on law, but on grace.
- God was creating a new people for himself, where faith, and not race, mattered. In the past the Jews had automatically been members of the people of God by birth; but now the tie with Israel had been severed. What matters now is whether or not one is in a relationship with Jesus.

## 2. LIFE IS FOUND IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

This relationship with Jesus is described in vini-cultural terms: **"I am the vine, and you are the branches"**.

There are many ways of describing a Christian: here is one picture amongst many.

A Christian is like a branch grafted by faith onto Jesus, the living vine.

To our ears, unfamiliar with the imagery, it sounds strange.

But there is at least one very positive aspect of this picture: it reminds us that commitment to Jesus involves an ongoing relationship with Jesus.

Commitment to Jesus involves more than a decision of a moment, it involves a relationship of a life-time.

Don't get me wrong. There is a need for a decision.

Faith may be a process in which we gradually explore the implications of Christian believing – hence the helpfulness of an Alpha course. But there comes a stage when we need to put our faith on the line – when we need to be able to say 'Yes, Lord, I believe you died for me', 'Yes, Lord, I believed you rose for me'.

In the NT that decisive moment of Christian believing is expressed in baptism. But that commitment to Christ expressed in baptism needs to be an ongoing commitment.

To put it another way, we need not only to be baptised into Christ, but to remain in Christ. Or in the words of Jesus here in John 15: **"I am the vine, and you are the branches (v5)... Remain united to me and I will remain united to you"** (v4)

### 3. LOSS IS PART OF GROWTH

There is nothing static about our relationship with Christ. It is a developing relationship. But, the painful truth, is that if that relationship is to develop, there will have to be losses. **“I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean, and bear more fruit”** (15.1-2)

Jesus is saying two things here.

*(i) dead branches are thrown away:* **“he breaks off every branch in me that bears no fruit”** (v2); Jesus develops this idea in v6: **“Whoever does not remain in me is thrown out like a branch and dries up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burnt”**. Dead wood from a vine has no use whatsoever.

We see this in our home: for we have a vine growing up on the south side of our house. Once it has got past the stage of fruit-bearing, it becomes brittle and snaps – it’s fit only for being thrown away. A dead branch off a vine is fit only for the dump. That, alas, is what happened to Israel. Israel failed to maintain her relationship with the living God, she failed to live up to her calling and produce fruit – and as a result she was ‘dumped’. Dead branches are thrown away.

Incidentally there is a warning here for us too. It’s not just Jews, but Christians too, who can take their relationship with God for-granted!

*(ii) Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, living branches are pruned.*

Jesus says of his Father, the gardener, **“he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit”** (v2b).

To return to our vine at home: in the summer there were branches everywhere and it was almost impossible to look out of our windows into the garden, because the view was totally obscured by the vine. But in December we will have to drastically cut back all the branches – for only in this way will we get decent grapes next summer.

If pruning is vital in the natural world, it is also necessary in the spiritual world.

There is all too often dead wood in our lives, such as the sins of pride and of anger, selfishness and self-indulgence, impatience, greed, jealousy... there is much in our lives that needs to be cut away.

- ***Sometimes God’s Word becomes the pruning knife:*** The writer to the Hebrews describes God’s Word as **“alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through.... It judges the desires and thoughts of our hearts”** (Hebs 4.12). Many of us, I’m sure, have experienced the cut of God’s knife, as we have read his Word in our quiet times, or as we have heard God’s Word preached on a Sunday – we have felt ashamed, rebuked, and humbled as God’s Word has done its work in our lives.
- But ***sometimes God uses circumstances to remove the dead wood*** in our lives. True, the initial circumstances may not be of his inspiration, but nonetheless it is amazing how disappointment, suffering, and even bereavement can be used to make us better people. My mind goes to Joseph who toward the end of his life said to his brothers: **“You plotted evil against me, but God turned it for good”** (Gen 50.20). Yes, God can use even the unfairnesses of life to work for our good.

They can be times of pruning, when as a result we emerge leaner and fitter Christians.

**“He prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit”**

#### **4. OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS NEEDS TO BE WORKED AT**

Jesus said: **“Remain united to me and I will remain united to you”** (15.4).

The impression is sometimes given that once we are grafted onto the vine, then there is nothing to do save to **“remain united to”** Christ.

But the fact is that it takes effort to remain in Christ.

Indeed, Jesus himself uses the imperative here: **“Remain united to me”**.

We need to work at our relationship with Christ. Just as a marriage relationship needs to be worked at – with husbands and wives, e.g. ensuring that they have time for one another – so too does our relationship with Christ.

How do we work at our relationship with Christ?

(i) ***we need to draw life-giving energy from him.*** **“Whoever does not remain in me... dries up”** (v6). It is as we remain in Christ, that we the branches draw fresh sap from the vine itself, so that in turn we are able to bear fruit. Not to remain in Christ – not to make time for a daily QT, not to make Sunday worship a priority – is to deprive ourselves of the life-giving energy of Christ & become barren. Alas, time and again we act as though we were supermen & superwomen, as though we in ourselves had the individual strength for all the demands and challenges of life. But the fact is that without maintaining our relationship with Jesus on a daily basis, we haven’t got the strength. To go back to my garden: in our garden we have a watering system for our vine – for only so our vine flourish. Similarly only those that daily draw sap from the vine will survive, let alone bear fruit.

(ii) ***we need to listen to him.*** **“Remain in me & (let) my words remain in you”** (v7). To remain in Christ is to allow his word to penetrate our hearts & minds. This means that we need to discipline ourselves to read God’s word, meditate on it, and listen to what is being said to us. To go back to my vine: when I water it’s not just enough to spray it with water, to do it good it needs to be soaked. Similarly, it’s not just about beginning the day with a reading – but about allowing God to actually speak to us and then to take that word with us through the day. That takes time & effort, but when we do that, then time and again there will be all sorts of situations in which that word becomes relevant. Marcus Aurelius once said: *“Our lives are dyed by the colour of our imagination”*. Even more are our lives coloured by the soaking of our minds and spirits in the Scriptures.

(iii) ***We need to discover his priorities.*** As we listen to Christ we need to open not just our Bibles, but also our lives. For Jesus does not just want to speak warm & soothing words to us – there are times when he wants to speak words of direction & of command. Look at 15.10: **“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love”**. In that particular context, Christ’s command is

associated with his command to love one another. However, the point I want to extrapolate is this: that abiding in Christ involves obeying Christ. For this to happen we need to discover Christ's priorities for our lives. So in our quiet times as also when listening to a sermon we need to ask ourselves: 'What does Christ want me to do – today, tomorrow, next month?' Jesus wants us to be activists – but activists whose activity is rooted in him and in his will for our lives. A Scottish preacher once said: "*Herodotus claimed that the bitterest sorrow is to aspire to do much and achieve nothing. No: the bitterest sorrow is to aspire to do much and to do it – and then to discover that it was not worth doing*" (James Simpson).

## 5. FRUITFULNESS IS THE TEST OF OUR RELATIONSHIP

Jesus said & still says: **"Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing"**

The whole point of our remaining united to Christ is that we bear fruit. "*The relationship with God does not provide enjoyment, peace of mind, state of contemplation, but demands movement, growth; its law is fruit-bearing*" (Bultmann). Remaining united to Christ is not about being so spiritually minded that one is no earthly good – that is a false spirituality. The key test of the reality of our relationship with Christ is that we bear fruit.

There has been much discussion as to what fruit Jesus had in mind.

- One scholar (Sir Edwyn Hoskyns) compared the words of Jesus here with the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. To "go and bear fruit", he said, is essentially to "go into the world". He cited John 12.24 as a parallel: **"I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces 'much fruit' (GNB: "many grains")** - the fruit in question being the salvation of the world.
- However, within the immediate context of Jn 15 love seems to be the fruit which Jesus had in mind: **"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love... My commandment is that: love one another, just as I have loved you"** (vv10, 12). In our own strength it is impossible to love as Jesus loved us – that only begins to be possible as we learn to remain united to Christ. But even if love be the key fruit – that cannot be over-differentiated from winning others to Christ. For it is only when the world sees that we love one another, that the world can have any chance of believing in the love of Christ for them!

Yes, Jesus wants us to live fruitful lives – but we can only do so as we remain in a relationship with him.

To recap: Jesus offers life, life in all its fullness – but that life is only found in a relationship with him. In that relationship, times of loss are often times of growth. We must never take our relationship with him for-granted: rather we need to work at it. And the key test of the reality of that relationship is that we live fruitful lives!