

Easter 5 (29.04.2018): "I am the true vine" - John 15:1-8

It has been good during the last two weeks of fine weather to get out into the garden. Both Avril and I enjoy being in the garden, although our hopes and aspirations may appear different. Avril carefully plans the balance of the garden, the variety of colour, of different plants, herbs and flowers - attractive corners, winding paths, carefully placed bird feeders and pots of all shapes and sizes. This requires many visits to garden centres. How it looks, the aesthetics of the garden, are hugely important to Avril. I was happier in my allotment where I would energetically dig and till the soil, build raised beds and then sow and plant, usually far too much. So when, like a happy little boy, I would bring in the harvest, Avril would say, "And what do you think we are going to do with all that?" No longer running an allotment, I'm still the digger, the preparer of the soil in our attractive courtyard garden. One task I'm still a novice at, however, is pruning; whereas Avril carefully inspects the rose bushes before confidently wielding the secateurs, ensuring strong healthy growth and a good show of flowers in the following year. We've never grown a grape vine, but our pride and joy is our hydrangea petiolaris. This climbing woodland plant, with its attractive, showy white flower heads and lovely autumnal yellow leaves, graces our back wall like a large fan, with its many branches, yielding from one single strong root, stretching boldly upwards and outwards. Not unlike a grapevine.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus uses the grapevine to give an illustrated Parable to his disciples. You can picture the scene. It's the night before his death. Jesus and his disciples have left the room, where Jesus had washed his followers' feet and together they had eaten their last supper. They leave Jerusalem behind them, perhaps exiting by what is called Stephen's Gate today, to walk down into the Kidron Valley and then ascend the slope of the Mount of Olives towards the Garden of Gethsemane. (Those of you who have just returned from the Holy Land will know exactly where they were). Perfect terrain for grapevines. Were they in blossom or fruit? Jesus, the great teacher, seizes the moment. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower" and "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in in me and I in them bear much fruit." Perhaps Jesus is comforting his disciples, and therefore us, with the promise that they will not be abandoned and left alone, but can be

confident of his continuing presence. He's certainly saying that we, as his disciples, can't go it alone. We must remain in the community that knows and loves him and celebrates him as Lord. Just as the branches of the vine are connected to that single strong root, we must stay in touch, in tune with Jesus, knowing him and being known by him. If anything gets in the way of our Christ connection, it has to be cut off, pruned, thrown away for how else can we remain healthy and produce good rich fruit? So we need to ask ourselves two questions. Are you and I, are we, is our church, our Parish community connected to Christ? And if we are how much fruit is there in our lives?

Just as the single root brings life to all the branches no matter how far away they are, Jesus brings life to us. The vitality of our spiritual life is dependent on our connection to Christ, the true vine. Are we grafted onto the life giving vine? Do we hear the word of God telling us to take up our cross and follow him? Do we love God and our neighbour as ourself? Perhaps there are personal goals or ambitions, perhaps there are events, actions you cannot forgive or forget. If they are getting in the way off our connection with Christ, if like some branches on the vine it means we are going in the wrong direction, then search for the secateurs, get rid of them, prune them. We don't always get what we want. Things don't always plan out as we had hoped. God prunes and often it can be painful, yet throughout it all, pruning can make us stronger and more resilient.

God plants, God prunes and God provides. As God provided the ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son, Isaac; as Jesus provided his love and his promise to his disciples to be with them always to the end of the age; so God provides for us in his infinite generosity. As followers of Jesus, as branches of that vine, we are now being asked to provide fruit and the fruit we are to bear are the fruits of love. Jesus' immediate words following this parable are, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." And again the wonderful promise made by Jesus in the Gospel reading, "if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." So we can ask again how much fruit, how much love is their in our lives, in our church, in our Parish, in our church worldwide? The church of Christ presented in some churches and in the media appears, at times, not the inspiration to reveal the fruits of the true vine, the fruits of love, but rather the

fear and condemnation of what some believe is not love. How fruitless it is to energise on condemning gay relationships and gay marriages instead of celebrating what love has truly revealed itself to be in the person of Jesus Christ. I believe the love of Christ is totally inclusive.

Indeed we only need to look at the amazing story of Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch in our reading this morning to provide evidence of Christ's inclusive love. Here is a man from Ethiopia, which was considered at the world's end in Jesus' time, almost certainly black, and castrated, probably at an age to cause hormonal change. Some Christians at this time were even reluctant to accept Gentiles. Yet Philip baptises the Ethiopian Eunuch as a disciple of our Lord so he can produce the fruits of the vine.

Are we connected to Christ? If we are, we shall show to all the fruits of his love? We shall love our God as Abraham did. We shall love one another, the community we share, the stranger in our midst, the homeless person in the street, the immigrant who arrived 70 years ago and the one who arrived yesterday. Then it will be a rich harvest indeed. Our lives depend on our loving, our connectedness to Jesus Christ, the one who calls us into communion to transform us by his love.

How might it feel to be part of the vine
Not just to see the vineyard from afar
But to be grafted in, to feel the stir
Of inward sap that rises from our root
Himself deep planted in the ground of love
What might it mean to bide and to abide
In such rich love as makes the poor heart glad

William Pattinson

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