

Address from Belinda Speed-Andrews, 2 May 2021

Now many of you may not know me very well, but one person who does know me, knows that Belinda and plants/gardening do not go together. I am though a very obedient daughter and when asked to cut back a particularly vicious pyracantha whose thorns would constantly stab one in the back when sitting outside on the garden bench, I duly did as I was asked. Like my hair, I have been known to go bald and so when Mum came back from the shops it was to the horrors of my pruning and not only a bald pyracantha but a very bald beloved plant that my late Father had bought my mother when they first moved into this particular house! As you can imagine I have never been able to live that one down and perhaps quite rightly so. But then Jesus talks about pruning and cutting off dead wood so maybe I wasn't so careless after all. I shall leave that to you green fingered among us here this morning to decide!!

So let us then take a look at John 15: 1-8. This is the final of John's I AM sayings of which there are 7 in total. I am the bread of life, I am the gate, I am the way, the truth & the life, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the good shepherd, I am the light of the world & finally in today's reading I am the true vine. I have never found John's Gospel the easiest of the Gospels to read and yet for me it contains some of the most beautiful Bible verses imaginable.

The passage this morning is part of Jesus' final discourse; Jesus knows he is going away, he knows he is going to die and this is his final chat with his friends. And to do this he uses the image of the vine, something, that although they were predominantly fishermen, would have recognised, they were familiar with the image of the vine, used in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the image of the vine was used to portray the relationship between God & Israel. Jesus knew they would be alright, but he knew her needed to give them words of comfort & encouragement. 'You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.' All you need to do is, 'abide in me as I abide in you'.

But why the imagery of the vine, what is it representing here in this context? I want to suggest that Jesus is using the vine to talk about community. Jesus is giving the disciples instructions about creating and sustaining the community of his disciples, that he believes can continue to live in his love and the love of his Father, by abiding in him, in spite of the persecution they will all face.

The image of the vine as a community though poses challenges for the disciples in their fear, confusion & loss. And so likewise for us as a community. If we at St David's embraced this model of community what would that possibly look like? I want to suggest three things.

A community that is a vine is one of interrelationship, mutuality & indwelling. To get an idea of what this looks like, branches on a vine are almost indistinguishable from one another, unable to know where one branch stops and the next one starts. Can you see a join between a branch and the trunk of a tree? The branches, us the disciples, all grow out of the central vine, Jesus. That is what it means to be baptised. This then suggests that there are no free-standing individuals in a community but that each one is rooted in Jesus and so embraces the other in pain & in joy; therefore no individual status. This is challenging in a culture where individualism is the ultimate goal, self-sufficiency, success for me at all costs, I am the best. We are called to be a community of steadfastness in our relationship with Jesus and to bear fruit. What is that fruit? Fruit is to act in love, love for the community, an act of love shaped by Jesus. It is a community not built by individual accomplishments, choices or rights but by corporate accountability to the abiding presence of Jesus and the corporate enactment of love of God & Jesus. I would want to say that this is a picture of St David's in the love & care it has shown for one another over the last 18 months. It takes time & effort and sometimes a lot of hard work to do this and you have.

Secondly, the metaphor of the vine suggests a non-hierarchical community. That in itself is a challenge for the Church as it has been and still is incredibly hierarchical. There should be no branch with pride of place over any other and the pruning and cutting away of dead wood underpins this idea. The only difference visible is the fruitfulness of the branches and it is the farmer, God, who makes those decisions not the community to enhance fruitfulness where he will. This should challenge us because in the fourth gospel there is only one measure of one's place in the community of the faithful and that is, to love Jesus as he has loved us, nothing more nothing less. This suggests that any decisions of power & governance in the community are made in the radical egalitarian love of the vine image. This is harder to achieve as our structures currently are not made for this, but it doesn't mean we can't as a community strive to be more egalitarian in our thinking, decision making and worshipping as we look to re-build our future together.

And finally the image of the vine is anonymous. One branch lacks any true distinction in appearance from another, in character or gift. And so this image of the

vine is bought into sharp relief when compared with Paul in his well-known verses in 1 Corinthians 12 and his description of us all being a part of the body of Christ, where each part is distinct, where one part cannot survive without the other. But here in John's gospel the image of the vine does not give us distinct roles. Unlike John's gospel, Paul does not remove our distinctiveness but locates each of us within the body of Christ; each needed one for another, but the fruit we bear is distinct. For John though the image of the vine undercuts celebration of individual gifts and again this challenges us the Church in the understanding of today's culture where celebrity status, individualism and self-expression are top of the agenda. This too is a challenge for each of us as we are all individuals with our own gifting. I share this very short teaching to help think about this aspect of community: There is a story of a Jewish Rabbi who asked those he taught how they knew the night had become day. One said it was when he could see the shape in the distance was either a dog or a sheep, another said it was when he could see all the lines on the palm of his hand and another said it was when he could see the leaves of the tree in front and know which tree it was. But the Rabbi answered "It is when you can look into the face of any man or woman and know that they are your true brother or sister, until you can do that it is
".still night

So what about us here in our parish? I would want to say that perhaps this last year has been a time of pruning in one or another for everyone and now as we come back together and look to recover & rebuild our communities, now is the time as Howard said a couple of weeks ago in his sermon, a time to think about what it is we as a community can let go of, the dead wood, & to look at where we can prune to encourage new growth & to do this as a community.

Earlier this week I tuned into a podcast with Archbishop Stephen Cottrell and Bishop Emma Ineson talking about the new vision for the Church of England in the 2020's. I can hear an inward sigh as you all think yet another new initiative, a new programme, money spent and nothing changing. I was encouraged though in the simplicity of the message and for me it reminded me of the image of the vine; a church centred on Christ, that is simpler, humbler and bolder where each branch abides in the vine to receive the gift of Jesus' love and to bear fruit so long as we, his disciples remain with Jesus.