

Sermon Easter 5, 2 May 2021

John 15 v. 1-8

This spring we cannot have avoided being struck by growth; a superabundance of growth in the wonderful weather we have had.

Jesus speaks of the vine and its growth, or the lack of it. It is three years before grapes can be gathered from new plants. They need constant training and pruning and a good deal of attention if the vine is to give the best fruit. Careful preparation of the soil is essential. The vine grows luxuriantly, drastic pruning is essential and so it is cut back for three years.

“I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener”. Jesus is working in this gospel with pictures and ideas which were part of the heritage of the Jewish nation. Over and over again in the Old Testament Israel is portrayed as the vine or the vineyard. For instance, in Isaiah 5 “the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel”. So, the vine became the symbol of the nation Israel. It was, I’m told, on the coins of the Maccabees. And a great golden vine was on the front of the holy place and therefore, one of the glories of the temple.

But surprisingly, so often the vine is used to describe Israel’s failure to do God’s will. In Isaiah’s picture the vine runs wild. Jeremiah complains that the nation has turned into a desperate plant of a ‘savage’ vine. Jesus warns the Jews that because you belong to the nation of Israel you think that you are a branch of the vine of God, but the fact that you are a Jew will not save you.

Jesus calls himself the true vine, an amazing self affirmation. What makes you as a Jew, or anyone else, a part of the vine, is an intimate relationship with me. You must be one of the branches joined to me. When the vine matures it bears two kinds of branches. One bears fruit, the other does not. The unwanted wood is not good for anything and is made into a bonfire and destroyed. “Dwell in me as I in you”.... No more can you bear fruit unless you remain united to me”.

The hidden strength and purpose of Jesus’ life was his contact with God. There was mutual indwelling. As William Temple says in his wonderful commentary on John’s Gospel, “It is a perfect love that has been given to us; it is nothing less than the love which unites the Father and the Son in the very Godhead, itself united by the Holy Spirit”.

Even if we are bearing fruit, that is no ground for contentment. There’s still the need for the pruning knife of the Gardener. The cleansing may be painful. It is almost bound to be, but the pain can be the condition of more abundant life, more abundant fruit. Mutual indwelling - there is a place within us which we need to visit to meet God in prayer and it is the place where God meets us.

Our heart is the garden where we meet the Father the Gardener. There will be weeds there, brambles or thorns or branches taking growth away and making the vine useless. Sometimes it will be good to uproot them so that they don’t spread any further. Some times it may be good to leave them, just recognise and take stock. Work will be needed in our garden if it is to remain an open and receptive and expectant place.

We will need to cultivate it by returning often and by watering it regularly, cutting back anything that is growing out of control. We need to turn over the soil by reflecting the place of God in our lives and relationships. But we will have help. As we toil the birds will eat the pests which threaten our plants. The bees will pollinate our flowers for us. The worms will ventilate our soil.

Friends will support us, then Christians who inspire us and guide us. We will remember words heard in church from the Bible and indwelling life from the bread and the wine. We are not in

full charge of everything, even ourselves. No, we are living cells in the web of all of God's creation, existing in mutuality, and inter-dependency with all inhabitants of planet Earth.

A garden harbours life for many creatures. In what ways does our life give nourishment to others? What gifts of ours bear fruit and bring joy to others. A garden is a place of companionship. God shares that with us. Who else shares the sacred space of our hearts' garden? And how lovingly do we respond when others offer us the space and invite us in to their holy ground?

The purpose God trusts to Israel has failed in its completeness, but it is being fulfilled in Jesus himself, the true vine, the open garden. He is the true Israel, the faithful remnant, united with God. Not a theme for words alone but for deeper apprehensions of silence.

The tone of Jesus in John is tender and intimate. There is a commandment not to do this or that, but primarily to be open to love. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love." We'll spend a little time in silence and dwell in God's love. Feel your body, back straight, feet on the ground. Breathe slowly. Identify, if you can, that place where you feel that God touches you. Share with him something of how you are feeling positive things and negative things.

Does anything need pruning? Ask him for the courage to let him do what needs to be done. Don't be afraid to show him your real and deepest needs, good and bad. He knows them, accepts them and loves you anyway. "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Dwell in my love".

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