

Sermon for Sunday 28 April 2024

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8: 26 – end; 1 John 4: 7 – end; John 15: 1 – 8

Care of vines -

- In the first couple of years, the vine should not be allowed to produce fruit. It needs to strengthen its root system before it can support the extra weight of fruit.
- Pruning is important. Not only would vines run rampant without control, but canes will only produce fruit once. Prune annually when vines are dormant, in March or April. This is before the buds start to swell, but when winter damage is apparent.
- Don't be afraid to remove at least 90 percent of the previous season's growth. This will ensure a higher quality product. Remember, the more you prune, the more grapes you will have.

Ouch! Being a cultivated vine sounds like a frustrating and painful process. No fruit allowed for a couple of years, so patience needed for gardener and plant. Then growth pruned back every year – and a lot of pruning at that! The more pruning the more fruit.

Jesus had probably watched vine-growers – or vine-dressers as we sometimes call them – at work. He knew what he was talking about when he used the image of himself as the vine, his Father as the vine-grower and us, His disciples, as the branches. “Abide in me,” he says, “as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” (John 15: 4)

Set beside Jesus' picture of the vine and the branches, our reading from 1 John offers a profound but also very practical meditation on what it means to abide in God and for God to abide in us.

Starting with Jesus' vine picture. The most important thing for the branches is of course that they stay connected to the vine, the source of

their life and the means of nourishment. Without that they will simply wither and die. If we are Christians, Jesus lives or 'abides' in us. Jesus didn't just come to die for the world, he died for each one of us in order to live in each one of us. We know this, as 1 John reminds us, because we have received God's spirit, the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:13). It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for us to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. It is, moreover, only because God first loved us that we are able to respond in love to Him. (1 John 4:19). Jesus invites us to live in Him as He lives in us.

That word 'abide' is slightly old-fashioned. But it suggests to me a quiet settling down. This is where I am. This is where I belong. It's permanent. The vine and the branches belong together, grow together, and ultimately produce fruit together. They are inextricably alive together. God's life flows through the vine into the branches making that fruit possible.

As we are part of the vine we can expect to be pruned or cleansed. The words for pruning and

cleansing are related in Greek, which makes sense when you think about it. The only things I regularly prune are roses – and geraniums – yes – don't laugh – long, leggy, over-wintered and much-cherished geraniums! My Granny grew four foot high geraniums, and I do too! Certainly, pruning can involve cutting off anything that looks unhealthy or a bit dead – hence the idea of cleansing. Sometimes we know that we have to let go of things that are not good for us. Sometimes Jesus just takes things away. Perhaps we can relate the idea of being pruned to our own struggles in faith or life.

When suffering comes we may feel we have lost almost everything, all the life and growth in our life. Like my February rose pruning when I cut off all the new growth that is just beginning. At times, when we are at the end of our own resources, when our faith is really stretched, we are forced to rely on Jesus, and then we may discover that this is when His life is most able to flow through us. Sometime we just have to be patient, like the vine in winter, waiting for God's timing before any growth or development seems

possible. We just have to trust that the vine-grower knows what He is doing. There will be fruit, even if it is costly, even if we don't see it.

Our reading from 1 John reminds us that abiding in God also means abiding in love. "God is love," he says, "and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1 John 4: 16b). This also means that we are saved from fear, because love and fear are incompatible. God's love, which sent Jesus to die for us, cancels out completely any need for punishment for our sins. So we do not need to be afraid on the day of judgement. The vine-grower has our best interests at heart. He acts out of love.

John is both profound and practical in his thinking. Since God loved us so much, if we claim to love Him, he says, we must also love our brothers and sisters. (1 John 4: 11-12, 21). This, of course, echoes Jesus' own words that we are to love one another.

So, let's be encouraged by this picture of Jesus as the vine and ourselves as the branches. As we stay connected to Jesus, His life flows through us.

Let's listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Together we are called to be a community of love – as we demonstrated yesterday in our reaching out to others at our 'Come and See' open day and concert. As Jesus' life flows through us we will bear fruit. His life will flow out to others. Lots of fruit. A great crop. More than we could have imagined or believed.

As we have just sung:

"You are the vine, we are the branches,
Keep us abiding in you.
Then we'll grow in your love,
Then we'll go in your name,
That the world will surely know
That you have power to heal and to save.
You are the vine, we are the branches,
Keep us abiding in you." (Mission Praise 643)

Amen

Revd Diana Young