

Easter 5 Year B 2018

Along with St Paul's image of the body, John's use of the image of the vine is amongst the most well-known and well-loved of images for the church. Both of course are dependent on this idea of interconnectedness: of our connection and dependence on Christ *but also* our connection and dependence on *each other*. And both are also dependent on a 'high' view of the church. In the biblical vision of things, the Church is not simply a casual association of like-minded individuals. It is not something we simply 'come along to', like we might a play or dinner party. It is not merely a fellowship, much less a club or society. And, the New testament is at pains to tell us, it is not merely a human institution. The church is in fact divine; the place of ongoing encounter with the Risen Lord. The New Testament takes a 'high' view of the church because Christ himself takes such a high view. He the head, we the body. He the vine, we the branches. Both Christ and Christian are bound inextricably to the other.

Now, any image or metaphor has its limits. And we should always be careful of pushing any we find in the bible too far. But they do remain helpful and we do keep turning to them because they do continue to offer us insight into the mystery of God and the mystery of faith. So, while the image of the Vine speaks to us, yes, of interconnectedness and naturally fruitfulness, it might also speak to us of vulnerability and fragility. The vine, dependent on one, narrow, often delicate stem that could so, so easily be knocked and broken, and kill all life for the plant and its fruit. The *fragility* of the vine - with all life and nourishment dependent on one stem - is an appropriate metaphor for us as the people who gather around and take our identity from the Crucified (the Fragile) One. The life of the church must always be lived out with a degree of humility. Strength and confidence will only get us so far. But vulnerability – humility – must always be evident in the community of Christ.

But in today's Gospel, John also plays on the idea of the *cultivated vine*. It doesn't simply grow wild, or let to do its own thing. It is cared for and nurtured. Indeed, it is controlled, and sometimes dramatically so. Nurtured, cared for and controlled for one purpose only – *to bear fruit*. And this bearing of fruit, we hear at the end of the text, is for the *glory of the Father*. Never just for ourselves, or for our survival, but for *the glory of God*. And so today's Gospel invites us to take seriously two, essential aspects of Christian life – *being faithful and being fruitful*.

St John emphasises the idea of *being faithful* in speaking of the necessity of remaining attached to the vine: *abide in me*. The branch cannot be separated from the parent tree and continue to live. The text is very clear on this: if you want life – to have true life - you have to be connected to the vine. There are no exceptions. And this is a challenge (and a challenge we have to take seriously!) in a world which expects - even demands – relativism: the idea that all beliefs are essentially the same, and that there is no one truth. In a pluralist and relativist society, then, we need to ask of ourselves, as much as the Church needs to ask of itself, what *is* our unique, determined identity as followers of Christ? Can we say that Jesus is our *way, truth and life*? Is it to him, and alone, to whom we are bound, to whom we are grafted, *in* whom we find life and *for* whom we bear fruit? To assert this places us at odds with every moral and intellectual direction our cultures is headed.

Modern life allows us to be very easily connected to other vines in our lives - even *competing* vines. They may well look to be true. All sorts of things in life claim our attention and devotion and from them seek to grow fruit. Things that seem so good and right... We might be left asking, is there, then, only one, true vine? Is there only one *true vine* which is *the most* life-giving, the most nourishing, and the most dependable? As followers of Jesus we must conclude, that, ‘Yes’, in him *is* found the life source that *matters*, that is *true*. And we must ask ourselves - how are we grafted into this one, true vine? How *sure* is our connection to the branch?

The Gospel today highlight show the strength and sureness of our connection to the branch is dependent on the *pruning* that occurs. That’s the hard part... *The faithful life is the disciplined life; the pruned life*. All that does not conform to the Christ-life needs to be cut away. It is costly and painful. But our *fruitfulness* depends on it. Now, one of the disciplines that leads to fruitfulness in the life of faith is simply that we indeed *be* part of the vine: not being our own individual plants doing our own thing. In other words, to bear fruit, we must prune away our individual ideas, plans and ambitions, and commit to the community, commit to the *discipline of community*, if you like. It is important that we be strongly connected to God and *others* who believe in God. To bear the fruit that brings God the glory, we need to remain attached to the vine, and attached to each other. We are not designed to struggle on the path to God alone. I am always suspicious of people who claim they don’t need others to find God. It’s not a Biblical idea!!

We cannot bear godly fruit in isolation. We need to *give of ourselves* so others may grow and thrive and that we grow and thrive. In a remarkable way, a leaf one end of the vine supports and gives life and nourishment to a branch at the other end. So, for the church. We cannot be authentically Christian in isolation. So, committing to *the discipline of community* is one way we will be supported to bear fruit and support others to bear fruit. But the gospel tells us of another way in which we are pruned: *By the word I spoke to you*. Christ's word - his living word - cuts away the distractions and illusions that keep us from God and the life God desires for us. In John's Gospel, the Word is Christ himself. Christians have always maintained that in a unique and particular way, the Word of Scripture shows us Christ the Word. In our reading from Acts today, we see how our reading of the Scriptures occurs within the life of the church, and the light of its faith. We read the Scriptures in the company and witness of others. It is the church's communal reading of Scripture that illumines our reading of Scripture. In seeking to conform ever more closely to what Scripture shows us about Christ, we experience God using his pruning secateurs: the Scripture challenges us, nourishes us, encourages us, and advises us. Scripture prunes us by addressing the all that might hinder us from bearing good fruit - or any fruit at all.

Attentiveness to and immersing ourselves in the Word of Christ is a sure sign of the faithful life and also of the *fruitful life*. Scripture prunes us and helps bear fruit in our lives and in our actions. This of course is what the Second Reading from the First Letter of John highlights: Love God, love each other!! Connected to each other and connected to Scripture means we don't just live for ourselves or invent something to suit ourselves. It means our lives are impacted and changed. It's the way we love and interact with each other that shows how truly we are grafted to the true vine; how we show we are truly disciples.

By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. Faith in the Risen Lord is the invitation to share the Good News - to reach out in love and bring those who feel far from God close to God, to graft them onto the true vine. The sign of true of love is that we desire others to share in life we enjoy. But it is only in deepening ourselves into the life of the community of faith and into the life of Sacred Scripture that we can hope to live in the way that will inspire others to follow our footsteps and discover what we have discovered: the joy of knowing God's love that comes to us through Jesus and his Church. Amen.