

John 15: 1-8 – I am the Vine
Sermon for Sunday 2nd May, 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton

I'm going to start with a rather strange picture. It's old, 400 years old, and at first glance all you may see are the odd fashions of the time – shoulder pads of fur, and beards cut so square you could eat your lunch off them ... and people at the front showing off their nobly knees.

But take a closer look. Find the 'hidden' religious messages. You've got about a dozen men sat round three sides of a table: remind you of a supper, a last supper? On the table, alongside plates of fish and chicken, could these be quails? Could there be wafers of bread, like manna? Remind you of the food given to the Israelites in the desert? Now look at the front left: water gushing out of a fountain, collected and carried over to the right where it's poured out and distributed, surely as wine for such a group of worthies? Remind you of a certain wedding, at Cana in Galilee?



Now look above, the canopy over them all, intertwined with the stems and branches of a grape vine, with huge, succulent bunches of grapes hanging down. Remind you of Someone who called himself 'the true vine'?

Who are these people? The picture shows the Schmalkaldic League (I'm really surprised you didn't get that!) – the group of German princes at the time of the Reformation who stood up for Martin Luther. Luther had criticised of the Pope and the practices of the Catholic Church of his day, and in response the pope had banned Luther's writing and demanded he be handed over to be tried for heresy. The princes stood by their man. The pope threatened them with excommunication – cut off from the church. The message of the picture is clear: the pope might say what he liked: he couldn't cut them off from Christ. They are sheltered by the vine; they drink the fruit of the vine; they are part of the vine. They are bearing rich fruit.

Listen now to the first two verses of Isaiah 5: *"I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit."*

In the Old Testament the vine is a symbol representing Israel, a nation planted by the Lord in the land he gave them. God, says the prophet, prepared the space, dug the ground, removed the stones, improved the soil, and put in infrastructure – a wall, a watchtower, a winepress. That's how much God cared. That's the investment God put in. And yet ... and yet, the fruit was bad – elsewhere it says rotten; elsewhere, sour grapes; elsewhere, no fruit at all. The vine had gone wild. Israel had done its own thing, thought it knew better, and went off after other gods. BUT, Jesus says, *I am the true vine* – the true Israel. All the love, all the preparation, all the care God had given to planting Israel, it's multiplied in Jesus. Jesus comes as true representative of God. Jesus comes truly doing what Israel was supposed to do – loving God whole-heartedly and loving neighbour as yourself. Finally, someone is getting it right.

'I am the true vine', says Jesus: 'remain in me and I will remain in you'. You won't get it right on your own. You'll fail, like Israel failed. But stick with me, and we'll get it right together. If you stay part of the vine, then you'll have his sap running through you. And that 'sap' is love. As we heard in our first reading (1 John 4: 10, 12): *'This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us... No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete within us.'*

How do we remain in him? Jesus insists it's about his words remaining in us. 'Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest,' as the old collect says. Let your ears itch for his words. Take time to absorb them. Meditate on them. Apply them. Listen out for new implications of them. And then let your prayers be shaped by them. Jesus says to let his words remain in us and then we may ask whatever we wish and it will be given us – because then what we are wishing will be in line with what God is doing. And our lives will be fruitful.

I once had a grapevine. I identified it when I moved into my previous house in Chatham in Kent. That was in early spring. When I next inspected it, it had grown. A shoot had reached up to the top of the fence, and then followed the fence to the back of the garden, around the shed, and along the back wall. In fact, by the time I caught up with it, I think it had done three laps round the garden. But there was no fruit, no grapes; there would be no Chateau Chatham. Why? I hadn't pruned it. Grape vines will grow prodigiously, but without pruning there will be no fruit. I must admit I'm a bit shy of pruning. I'm frightened I will kill off anything I take the secateurs to. But a proper gardener knows many plants need deep pruning. Proper gardeners are happy for shrubs to look dead for a while, giving them time to rest and be renewed, for then they come back stronger, and flower and fruit abundantly. Jesus says God his Father is the master gardener who prunes the branches, that they may be fruitful. I wouldn't have the nerve: it takes faith to trust him he is doing the right job.

The last year feels like one almighty pruning, for individuals, for the church, and for society. So much of life has been cut back, and I am not minimising what people have suffered. The Bible is consistent that out of suffering comes growth. Even from what looks like death new life can spring. We have been cut off from fellowship with one another. Many have hardly if at all been able to gather for worship for over a year, and that's been tough. But the most important thing is whether we have stayed within the vine that is Christ. Sometimes we have probably doubted. Sometimes (probably often) our prayers have felt like they bounce off a brick wall. Sometimes we will have wondered where the life-giving Spirit (sap of the vine) has gone.

For me, each time we have restarted services in church after a lockdown, there's been part of me that hasn't wanted to, that's felt this was just another burden, another job to get done. But, each time, when we've actually started the service, I have felt new energy and new life – a reconnection with God and with the fellow worshippers. Of course, there is still uncertainty. Of course, for some the time is not quite yet. But I believe the time is now coming when the sap is rising again. The time is now coming when the connections maintained through phone calls, social media and online can be renewed through meeting-up face-to-face, something we've longed for and yet have been taught to fear. For some, we may need first time for rest and quiet restoration (even a holiday!) but the time is now coming to gather again under the shelter of the vine, to drink of the fruit of the vine, and so to bear fruit ourselves in the name of God, the true gardener.