

Sermon 2 May 2021

Acts 8:26-40 John 15:1-8

I love the image of the vine that Jesus uses here. I guess it has something to do with my rural background. And as the society of the time was very much a rural society, it was an image which Jesus's listeners could relate to. It was an image which was, not only part of their present life, but also part of their history. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. Isaiah 5:1 *'Now I will sing a song for the one I love about his vineyard. My beloved has a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill.'* Jeremiah 2:21 *'How could this happen? When I planted you, I chose a vine of the purest stock – the very best. How did you grow into this corrupt wild vine?'* Ezekiel 19:10 (referring to Israel) *'Your mother was like a vine.'* Psalm 80:8 *'You brought us out of Egypt as though we were a tender vine.'* The examples go on and on.

Vines grew all over Palestine, and in fact, the vine had become a symbol of the nation of Israel. So Jesus, as he is wont to do, taps into something with which the people are very familiar. In this case, he likens himself to a vine, and not just any vine, but a true vine. What does he mean by this?

Firstly, he is saying that he comes directly from God. *'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.'* The second point lies in the word 'true' – *'I am the true vine.'* Jesus is saying that he is the real deal. In the Old Testament we see Israel being referred to as a vine. Jesus is saying that he is the new Israel; he is the real and genuine Messiah. This is about new beginnings.

It is interesting that in the previous chapter of John, Jesus says, *'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'* John 14:6. So Jesus is now re-emphasising this point. In Jesus we have the genuine article. He is saying, 'I am the real thing. Stick with me and you are on the straight and narrow. Stick with me, and I will lead you to a new relationship with God.'

So where does the pruning come in? I am sure we are all reasonably familiar with the practice and benefits of pruning. Essentially, pruning takes place at the end of the growing season in order to prepare the tree or plant for the next growing season. In order for maximum fruit to be produced those branches which are not going to be productive are cut off so that the good branches produce as much fruit as possible.

So who was Jesus thinking of when he referred to those branches which needed pruning, the non-productive branches? Firstly, those Jews who had not accepted him for who he was. They were, after all, branches of God's vine. This was a picture that prophet after prophet had drawn. But they refused to listen to him, to accept him, so they are the useless branches.

Secondly, his reference encompasses something far more general, something which relates very much to us today. This was a feature of the stories of Jesus. On the one hand, they were pertinent to a situation as it was then. On the other hand, they are pertinent to us today. In this case, he is referring to those Christians who listen to his word, who profess to be Christians, but in practice they fall very short. In other words, they are useless branches – all leaf and no fruit!

Now we all have our failings and our moments of weakness, but there is little doubt that being a Christian does call for a degree of commitment and discipline. There is the story of an old guy in the backwoods of Kentucky who could be counted upon to show up at revival meetings whenever an evangelist came to town. At the end of each service when the invitation was given, he would come down the aisle, get down on his knees, raise his arms to heaven, and cry out, 'Fill me, Jesus! Fill me, Jesus!' Then within a matter of days, he would slip back to his old ways. But when the round of revival meetings was held, he would once again go to the meetings, walk down the aisle shouting, 'Fill me, Jesus!'

On this particular occasion, he was down on his knees again, yelling to the ceiling, 'Fill me, Jesus! Fill me, Jesus!' when from the back of the church a lady called out, 'Don't do it, Lord. He leaks!'

Of course, the truth is we all leak, but if we are to be productive branches of God's vine, if we are to produce fruit on his behalf, then we need to do everything in our powers to fulfil his commandments, through our actions and our words. That means to spread the love, though reaching out to the needy and through supporting and uplifting through what we do and say to one another.

Martin Luther King said, *'Life's most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others?'* When we have a community whose members don't just care for each other, but translate that care into action, then we have a healthy community in which every member is emotionally, spiritually, and even physically nourished and sustained. We have a community that goes some way towards reflecting God's kingdom.

Our church must provide a lead, must be a catalyst for the establishment and growth of such a community. That, my friends, is why we must grow our church in every sense of the word. We all have a role to play in this, every single one of us. As Paul says in Romans 12:5, *'We are all part of Christ's body, and each of us has different work to do.'*

If we are not too sure just what that work could be, we can at least take on board advice from Paul as he goes on to say, *'Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them. Love each other with genuine affection. Love in harmony with one another.'* If we attend to that with all our heart, we will go a long way to creating a community that is in accordance with God's will, and our church will grow.

