

John 15:1-17 St Andrew's 2nd July 2023

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

⁹ 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: love each other.

We've been going through chapter 14 over the last few weeks, where Jesus has been speaking to the eleven disciples after the last supper. This is before his arrest some time very early in the morning, when it was still dark. The other Gospel writers don't spend much more than a chapter on this period of a few hours, while John devotes 4½ chapters – a fifth of his Gospel of 21 chapters on this time.

We've probably heard quite a few talks on Jesus being the vine and we are the branches....the first 8 verses and also on love..... the next 9 verses. Familiarity with a passage can often weaken its impact, because we've heard it before and know what Jesus is saying. Skating over a passage because of its familiarity usually happens when its content doesn't match the reality of what Jesus says should be happening in the lives of his disciples.

In Littlebourne chapel we've been going through the Acts of the Apostles, and there we see that what was happening in the lives and actions of the disciples of Jesus matches what Jesus tells us in this passage. The church was founded on the day the Holy Spirit fell on all of those in the house where they had gathered, and the church grew very quickly. The disciples healed the sick and crippled, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were manifest in Jew and Gentile alike and love abounded as they shared what they had with one another. Is that what the church looks like today?

When we look at this passage, is it that we feel uncomfortable about being pruned – the lopping off of branches in order to allow new growth to come forth? The vineyard analogy is something we can see with our own eyes as vineyards are found in some numbers just a few miles away from us. Today the vines are in full leaf and growing tall. In February, they were spindly sticks pruned to about a foot or two off ground level looking pretty bare and almost pathetic, albeit still in very nice, neat rows.

Jesus tells us straightaway that he cuts off branches that bear no fruit. Let's look at Hebrews 12:7-11 which talks about discipline: "*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For*

what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Pruning involves doing things that can be hard: ridding ourselves of things that do not please God, humbling ourselves, putting the needs of others above our own, but most of all, in order to bear fruit, giving Jesus the attention He desires from us.

We have a lovely white scented climbing Iceberg rose growing against the porch. This year it was the best it's ever been. It was somewhat savagely hacked in the winter to tidy it up. Yet it was so top heavy this year that when it rained it was almost going to break as the masses of petals filled with water. It had to be pruned, and looks rather sad. My brother who went to Wye College and got a degree in Horticulture, popped over on Tuesday. He took one look at the rose and said you need to cut down to a foot above ground level to get new growth as the old thick branches will just sprout out the top and make it too top heavy again. Cutting it right back seems such a shame as it will have a second flowering later in summer. But to get the best out of it, it will have to be cut right back.

Recently we looked at the warning to the church in Laodicea, which thought it was rich and prosperous, but was actually poor and naked because it was lukewarm and ready to be spat out. That lukewarmness or even coldness is not what Jesus wants from us. He offers us a solution as He stands at the door and knocks waiting to be invited in.

So what is the fruit that the vine bears? Galatians 5:22-25 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* We have also often been reminded about the fruits of the Spirit. We are less often reminded that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Do our passions and desires take priority over submission to Christ Jesus? Is our main focus in life being like the eleven to whom Jesus was speaking – the eleven who left everything to follow Jesus? These men brought good news to the people and as a result the church grew rapidly after Pentecost. They saw fruit in a harvest of souls – they became fishers of men.

There are two ways of the looking at the church today: the glass half empty because of lukewarmness or even coldness; or the glass half full because, praise God, she is being pruned to be more fruitful in the future!

However, to encourage us, we know that things can change rapidly once the Holy Spirit takes control over us. In the days of Whitfield and Wesley, the church looked much the same as it does now: not much fruit being born. It all changed in a matter of a few decades as revival swept the land. That can happen again.

To be a branch in the vine that is Jesus, means we do what he wants because apart from Jesus we can do nothing fruitful. That involves surrendering our wills to his will. Jesus says we have to remain in him and for his words to remain in us before we can receive what we ask. Jesus tells the eleven disciples that they are clean because of what he has told them already. Nearly all of us here know what Jesus has told us because we've heard and read his words for many years. Let us not be diverted by the things of the world that seek to draw our attention on matters that will never bring glory to the Father, nor bear any fruit. Focusing on Jesus and what he would do, that will bring glory to the Father.

Moving on to the next 9 verses on love, please note it is conditional. “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love”. The converse may apply: if you disobey my commands, you will not remain in my love and be like the branches cut off and thrown on the fire. Jesus commands us to love each other as he loves us. He tells us that we are his friends if we do what he commands. Again, if we do what He commands. He tells us that he has made known to us everything he learned from Father God. There can be no compromises and we see in the Acts of the Apostles that they didn’t compromise, but steadfastly remained in love with Jesus as He remained in them.

It is too easy to compromise on the Gospel message where it upsets people who find it hard to obey what Jesus commands. The two biggest obstacles where we could be lukewarm or even cold, are loving God with all our hearts minds and souls; and loving our neighbours as ourselves. Loving God means giving Him attention and time. Loving people means giving them our attention and our time... also perhaps our money and working on things that we don’t enjoy. Jesus asks us to make his joy complete by remaining in him as the vine and as love. The world sees love as an emotion: it often is. Love is also an act of will: a choice we make. Thankfully we have Holy Spirit to encourage us to make the choices to love both Jesus and other people.

I know most of you here this morning. Some I have known for 35 years and some perhaps only a week or two. That works both ways. Can I say truthfully that I love all of you? Can you all say that you love me? That is the challenge of this passage. Our love for God has to be pro-active – a jargon word that didn’t exist when I was a boy – because He wants us to spend time with Him, and He doesn’t force Himself on us to give him that time and attention. Consequently, we can all choose how much time we spend with Him, just as we can choose how much time we spend with each other in the fellowship. Love in our natural and church families is often reactive, rather than pro-active. I’ll do anything for my family and I’ll (probably!) do pretty much anything within reason for all of you. See - I’ve sort of qualified my love for you, but if you asked me what I can do for you that is line with what the Holy Spirit says (another qualification!), there is a high likelihood that I would be able to help you. Can we say the same about Jesus asking us to do something for him? I’ve said this before that my fear as a child hearing that I should obey Jesus was that he would ask me to be a missionary to Mongolia. He has never asked me this and he will make the desires of our hearts to serve him match what he asks of us. For example, when I first met Amy, who was here last week, I would never have thought that she would want to be a missionary in a foreign land, that she even had it in her to learn several foreign languages and that she would depend on God for her needs. She didn’t know that this was her path chosen for her by God when she gave her life to Jesus over 20 years ago. God changed the desires of her heart, and she went to Tanzania with YWAM, went to Bethlehem, and then to Turkey to share the Gospel with people who didn’t know Jesus. We can trust God that he will ask us to do what he knows we can do and are willing to do as well.

I come to verse 16 “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit”. At first glance it’s obvious that Jesus called his disciples from the work they were doing to follow him. We don’t know if he called others who said “no thanks”, but probably not, as he knew who would say yes, and there had to be twelve. The Word of God is not like other words, because it applies eternally. We don’t think these chapters are just for the eleven disciples with him, but are for all of us. There would be no point talking about them if they only applied to the eleven who are all dead and buried. Jesus asks each one of us to remain in him, to obey his commands and to bear fruit. When each of us made the decision to follow Jesus, was it our choice or did Jesus choose us? Ephesians 1:4 says, “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight”. God’s criterion for choosing is not based on us. 1 Corinthians 1:26-30 “Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of

noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world . . . God chose what is weak in the world . . . God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus”. Why did God choose me or you? He chose us to demonstrate His character. He chose us that we may know Him and love Him. He chose us because He is love (1 John 4:8). God is gracious, He is merciful, and He has a glorious plan for each of us.

I won't go into a theological discussion on predestination as it's unhelpful. If we have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, then we have the assurance of forgiveness of sins and a place with Him for eternity. Remember we are a chosen people and royal priesthood of believers.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. If there are things that need pruning, removing, the prayer team will be happy to pray with you. If there are things need changing, let us ask Holy Spirit to reveal them to us. If there are things that require more of our attention, whether in our love for God or others, let us ask Holy Spirit to prompt us and encourage us to align the desires of our hearts with His desires.

Let us pray