

The True Vine

3 5 15

Almighty God,
who through your only begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us
the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us
you put into our minds all good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect.

Our text may be found at the beginning of today's gospel from John 15 (v1):

'I am the true vine.'

Are you keen on gardening ? Today's teaching is rooted in horticulture, to be precise viniculture, the cultivation of the vine. Now one thing I miss about living here in a flat in Dinard is my garden and, believe it or not, I do enjoy cutting the church grass. And though I know little about the art of cultivating grapevines, I do enjoy the result therefrom ! But one thing about Jesus the teacher is that Rabbi Jesus knew his audience, he knew their background, knew what they knew and what they understood so he could speak to them in ways they could understand. So you'll not be surprised that he chose examples from the experience and from the culture of those to whom he spoke.

To a Jew, a vineyard is a symbol of Israel, the Jewish nation; a flourishing vine is a symbol of the way the Chosen People of God flourished as a result of their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah (5 v1 - 7), Jeremiah (2 v21), Ezekiel (19 v10), Hosea (10 v1), the Psalms (80 v8), all picture the House of Israel as a vineyard or a vine. And there are, of course, warnings of degeneration, of the vine running wild, of not being fit-for-purpose.

With this in mind, we can see that Jesus begins today with a challenging statement: **'I am the true vine'**. Now the word John uses in Greek for true is αληθινος (alethinos) - a word which describes something that is real, sincere, genuine. When Jesus declares **'I am the true vine'**, he is claiming to be authentic, the genuine article - he is the embodiment of how the Jews should be, the embodiment of what the Chosen people of God are meant to be like. It is a truth claim that challenges the authenticity of his religious opponents, the Pharisees and the priests in the Temple at Jerusalem.

There are two aspects to the image to which I'd like to draw your attention this morning: one is the idea of abiding in Christ; the other the practice of pruning.

'Abide in me as I abide in you'. To our ears 'abide' has a curiously old-fashioned ring to it. Abide can mean to live with, to put up with, to accept and submit to, to remain faithful. Here in Greek, μένω (meno) usually means remain or continue. Therefore what Jesus is commanding us to do is to stay in touch, to continue to be connected. For the life-giving sap to flow up from the roots through the central vine and out to each individual branch, each branch has to stay in touch.

If my computer is not plugged in then, it lacks the power, the flow of electricity, to work. And Jesus' promise is simply this, to remain faithful is to bear fruit: **'Those who abide in my and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing.'**

Then there is the question of pruning. Jesus says of our Father, God the vine-grower that **'He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch in me that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.'** This is the art of effective viniculture: to get rid of dead wood and to prune back the healthy growth to make it stronger. The problem of suffering, the problem of when bad things happen to good people is a major challenge to our belief in a loving, all-powerful God. But here, in this simple image, may be a reason why painful things do happen to good folk.

So let me leave you this morning to reflect further for yourselves on this interesting trinity of a relationship: God the vine-grower; Jesus the true vine; and we, Christians, the fruitful branches. If we abide in him and he in us, what not is possible ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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