

THE TRUE GRAPEVINE

Acts 8. 26-40

1 John 4. 7-21

John 15. 1-8

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The image of the vine to describe our relationship to God did not start with our Lord. The Old Testament is replete with this image, as in the writings of the prophet Isaiah and Psalm 80, which both speak of *Israel* as God's vine. To quote the psalm: 'You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land' (80. 8-9).

But the vine was broken; it produced wild grapes, was uprooted by the wild beasts, burnt with fire and cut down. Internal corruption and ungodliness made Israel vulnerable to her foes. In the same psalm, the psalmist cries out, 'Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine...let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself...Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved' (80. 14, 17, 19).

God did indeed, in the fulness of time, send the Son, the 'one at (his) right hand', Jesus Christ, in whom God showed the light of his countenance to make us whole. On the night before he died for us, the Son of Man spoke softly and gently to his disciples, and spoke words that have been forever cherished in his Church. St John gives us some of the phrases in today's gospel passage: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower...you are the branches...abide in me...because apart from me you can do nothing'.

Vine imagery was present everywhere in first-century Palestine and in the rest of the Roman Empire. Vines could be seen throughout the countryside, and even in the city. Think, for example, of the grapevines and olive trees in Jerusalem's Garden of Gethsemane, across the Kidron Valley from the Temple. And the Temple itself had golden vine branches as decorations to remind the faithful of their call to be God's vine.

Wine, together with bread, was (and is) a staple and symbol of life; and Jesus used both to convey the idea of the new life that the world would receive through him. Christ's words and signs to the first disciples comforted St John's community of disciples fifty years later; and they remain words and signs of life for us now, both as a Church and as individual members. They continue to reveal the power of our Lord's death and resurrection.

Let us take the points of this morning's gospel in order. Firstly, in spite of the calling of ancient Israel to be God's Vine, Jesus *embodies and personifies* the whole people of God as the one true faithful Servant. Christ alone can say, 'I am the true Vine, and my Father is the vinedresser'. These words, staggering in their authority, would be ludicrous and dangerous on the lips of a sinner and in the mouth of any other leader. But our Lord, the Word made flesh whose Humanity is complete, free from sin and surrendered to God, speaks the profound truth about himself. He is the Vine belonging to his Father, who owns the vineyard and tends the vine.

Secondly, you and I are the branches. Just as Christ is the Head of the Body, the Church, of which we are members; so also Jesus is the vine and we are its branches. The vine's life flows from him through the whole plant, so that the branches may yield grapes. Wine (along with Bread) was used at the Last Supper: 'This is my Blood which is shed for you'. The Eucharistic connection to today's gospel is pervasive. The life flowing through the Vine, as in Holy Communion, is our Lord's life-giving,

restorative, sacrificial love for sinners who, otherwise, would be cut off from God and lifeless.

Thirdly, vine branches need constant attention and pruning to remain fruitful. In pruning, everything is removed from the branch which diverts the power to produce fruit. Sometimes, long, leafy branches which seem important drain away fruitfulness. These must be pruned far back to their origin, from which they distract and draw the life away. Increased fruitfulness in vineyards and gardening, as in life in general, results from discipline, simplifying, and clarification of purpose. Good vines are not left wild; they are closely cut and constantly attended to.

Fourthly, branches must adhere to the vine in order to live and be fruitful. If branches do not abide in the vine, through internal disease and rot or an external cut, they are cast forth. The wood from a grapevine, when it dies and dries, is not good for much except fuel to be burned; and even then it must be cut and chopped for kindling, as Jesus said: gathered, bundled and burned.

A Church community is a branch of the Vine. The whole Body of Christ, the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church which we profess in the Creed, is a great global Vine stemming from Christ, the root and head. But a Vine is an image of our indwelling in Christ. We are members of Christ's Body, branches of the Vine, freely by God's grace. But a Church family *chooses* to dwell in Christ. That indwelling ('abide in me') must be voluntary, complete, and constantly attended to. If we 'save' our lives, we lose them; yet if we lose our lives in Christ, we find them. Christ is the Vine, and we are the branches.

Let me summarise and finish. Our fruitfulness (and therefore our happiness) both as a Church and as Christians are due to the power of God in Christ, *released through us*. It is called forth by our faith and by specific prayers made in Jesus's name,

concerning matter after matter, day by day. We abide in Christ, and Christ shows his life and power through us. He is the Vine, and we are the branches. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

Amen.