

Fruitful Christians

Exodus 19:1-6; John 15:1-8

Some years ago I enjoyed a holiday in Cyprus and I have wonderful memories driving through the Troodos Mountains. After the heat and dust of Nicosia it was wonderful to be up in the cool, sweet-smelling mountains, covered as they were with pine trees. One Sunday, after going to a Greek Orthodox service which lasted three hours, I drove on through the area and marvelled to see that even in the most barren and bleak areas the local people had somehow managed to carve almost out of the rock face enough of a shelf to let some soil settle and a tender vine to grow. The hillsides that I travelled passed were covered with these clawed-out vineyards. Even driving through the tiny, scattered villages, so precious were these vines that they were grown across the road, so that as one drove through, one drove under archway after archway of vines. It must have been fun picking the grapes in due course – I can only hope they stopped the traffic!

Such hard work obviously went in to the keeping of these vines. The careful watering in that arid landscape; the constant checking for disease and crop pests; the hours of pruning and nurturing and cosseting. Making sure everything happened to produce the maximum quality crop of grapes. Time-consuming, laborious, hands-on. In the hot and in the cold, in the dry and in the wet, in order that the harvest would come.

It was the kind of work that would have been familiar to the people of Jesus' time. It's the kind of work that even in the more mechanical agriculture of our own country, most farmers would recognise. The great joy when things go right and there is a good crop, and the disappointment when things go wrong, and after all the work and labour, there's nothing to show for it, and all that remains is the cutting and pruning and tidying up. Burning the old, unfruitful rubbish, and making room, with hope, for something new and more promising.

It is that picture of hard graft, of success and failure, of fruitfulness and faith that Jesus talks of here – and we are challenged to apply it to our Church, our City, and our lives. When Jesus gives us these word pictures, He is not giving observations about the world of nature, He is telling us to learn lessons and to apply them to the lives we lead.

Jesus describes Himself as the true vine. For people of faith – this is where we get our strength, our nourishment, our connection. If that connection is strong and vital, then the things that we do, the things that we say bear something of the inspiration of Jesus. He is the vine, we are the branches. He is the strong, indestructible root, the source of goodness and kindness and mercy. He is the root and the anchor, the source of our health and hopefulness; He is our touch with the holiness of heaven and the source of our better instincts and the inspiration of our better actions.

He is the vine, we are the branches, His living arms reaching out into the world around us. Through the years we are encouraged to grow as we are nurtured. Time and effort is put in to ensuring that we know that we are loved, valued, cared for and encouraged to grow to our fullest potential. The relation of the vine to the branch is intimate, tender and special. The free gift of inspiring love is available to us if we are connected to the living power that is Jesus.

All this in order that we might bear fruit. All this in order that we might be fruitful Christians.

Branches cannot produce fruit if they are not connected to the vine. If the life force that is the inspiration of Jesus doesn't flow through us – we don't produce fruit. There are even times – and this is the painful thing that this image Jesus offers us makes quite clear – that to bear fruit – we sometimes need to be pruned. Pruning, as a gardener friend assured me, is more radical

than trimming. Pruning isn't about appearance, it is about providing for growth and planning for it, however painful it might look.

Apply that image to people – and we move to something that has a far deeper and more radical meaning. Christ is the vine and the Church and its members the branches which spread out into the world. But do we bear fruit? Some do not remain united to the vine and are like withered and useless branches. Some are like branches which are all leaves and spread everywhere but do not produce fruit. The vine grower has to be strong-minded in pruning.

To prune means to cut off some of the branches and that can hurt. Accidents, sickness, failures, the loss of a job, the death of someone we love – various unexpected events – can hurt and wound life in us and leave us in a state of grief and desolation. We feel empty. Life no longer flows through us; we have lost our enthusiasm and sometimes even all desires. We are wounded in our energies of life. Like the wounded vine whose branches have been cut off, we have to wait for new life to flow in us. We are pruned for something new, for a life more centred on God and the things of God.

Sometimes the pruning is not to remove accidental hurts but to remove self-inflicted ones. Few here today will not recognise some part of their life which causes them a little, or a lot, of harm. The way we respond to others; the propensity to gossip and say things that ought not to be repeated; areas of our lives locked up in selfishness, or greed, or a disregard for others, or wilful ignorance. Are there things, here and now, in your life, in your behaviour, in your relationship with others, that need to be pruned from your life because they cause harm, and produce nothing worthwhile?

If we do not prune or cleanse our lives we will not be or produce useful fruit. If we are too busy, or too lazy, or growing in a wrong direction, then the danger is that we will wither on the vine.

This challenge to all in the Church is an important one we not only hear but respond to in the near future. It has concerned and sometimes saddened me for a long time that so many members of the Church, here and elsewhere, claim membership yet either do not play a part and contribute their gifts and support to the church regularly, or sometimes – even at all. All those promises withering on the vine, the lost talents and skills and energy.

But Jesus, grieving, but realistic, prunes and then moves on. We find this uncomfortable, and we are left to deal with the implications. We are more comfortable with a fellowship that includes and welcomes (so is Jesus), but are nervous or resistant to a fellowship that demands commitment and action. “People are so busy”, the reasons go. “There is the family; work; other interests...” And all the while the true vine sees more branches withering and fruitless.

This could be a counsel of despair – recognition that the Church is supported by the few and not the many, even within its membership. For all the encouragement and invitation and opportunity – people hold back and we fear for the future.

Jesus does not. It is to the living branches He turns His attention – and asks – ‘what fruit do you bear for Me?’ What is it that your prayers, your thinking, your promises do when they turn in to action? Within His grace, reaching out to the world through us, there is still unquenchable hope, there is still magnificent forgiveness, there is unconditional love. Jesus offers this to us, and through us. He offers it to the whole world.

No matter how often the vine is pruned, no matter how hard it has to be cut back to remove branches that no longer bear fruit, new growth always comes. Jesus does not leave Himself without fruitful Christians – our calling is to grow, to blossom, and to bear the fruit of love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – for these we offer to an undernourished world – fruitful Christians feed the world.

“A tree is known by its fruit; a man by his deeds. A good deed is never lost; he who sows courtesy reaps friendship, and he who plants kindness gathers love.” ~ *St*

Basil

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen