

## Dependent branches

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's Wolvercote on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, 2 May 2021      Refs: Acts 8.26-end; 1 John 4.7-end; John 15.1-8

*'No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine'* John 15, 4  
*'Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture,  
he proclaimed to him the good news of Jesus'* Acts 8, 35.

Last month was the occasion of the census of population which Britain has been taking every ten years since this exercise began in 1801. For the first time it was carried out primarily online, which demanded an extra effort from all of us – it remains to be seen whether this diminishes the level of return. It is to be hoped not, because the census is a really important exercise, providing a database that is essential for all sorts of research and policymaking. It is much more than just a record of how many people live in each place, but even that is essential knowledge in relation to taxation at local and national levels, and for effective provision of services. But the census also provides information about other characteristics of the population – where are the most deprived areas, and what is the extent of deprivation and inequality? – what is the ethnic make-up of the population in different areas? – what is its religious composition? – and so on. These data assist much socio-economic research that helps us to understand our society and its problems better. The underlying assumption is that we are one society and nation, that we need demographic and sociological data in order to develop policies and provide services that reflect our *togetherness* in a joint enterprise. There is an implicit recognition here that we *are mutually dependent* – there are many things that we need to engage in together, and we need a data base to guide us. We are – or should be – 'all in it together', in that much disparaged phrase.

Our readings from Acts and John's gospel this morning both concern dependence. In Acts the eunuch is, we're told, in charge of the treasury for Queen Candice of Ethiopia. He was an outsider to the Jewish system but was evidently attracted by something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life – so he had made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship and evidently possessed a copy of the Jewish scriptures. Philip finds him reading Isaiah, but he confesses that he can't understand what he is reading – 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' He is only too ready to *admit his dependence* and seek Philip's help. So Philip proceeds to enlighten him – here the story always reminds me of the much more famous one of Jesus, unrecognised by the disciples, explaining to them the scriptures on the road to Emmaus. Their hearts were strangely warmed; the eunuch readily accepts what he has learnt and, as soon as the opportunity presents itself, asks to be baptised.

In our Gospel reading Jesus uses the symbol of the vine and its branches because it would be readily grasped by the Jews – it was part and parcel of Jewish imagery, and indeed the very symbol of Israel itself. Israel is repeatedly pictured in the Old Testament as the vineyard of God: 'Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt' sings the psalmist in Psalm 80, referring to God's deliverance of his chosen people from slavery. Yet this symbol is frequently a symbol of degeneration – of a vineyard run wild, ravaged by wild animals and producing only wild grapes. So effectively Jesus is saying to the Jews 'You think that because you belong to the nation of Israel you are a true vine of God. But the nation is a degenerate vine, as all of your prophets saw. It is I who am the true vine. Being a Jew won't help you – you must have a living fellowship with the true vine of God.'

Many of us will have travelled in vineyard regions and realised what a lot of attention vines need, with careful preparation of the soil and drastic pruning to conserve a vine's life and energy. When mature, the vine still bears two kinds of branches – those that bear fruit and those that don't. Those that do not bear fruit are pruned back, so that they won't drain away the plants' strength.

The Christian vine has all too many fruitless branches. There are those who claim to be Christian out of heritage or habit, but for whom it is no more than a label – encouraged perhaps by institutions like hospitals and the army asking for people's religion on the assumption that they have one. The census also asks this question, and sociologists of religion are predicting that the number of people answering 'Christian' this year will for the first time drop below half – this needs careful analysis, but it probably says as much about honesty of response as about the decline of religious faith. Then there are those who listen

in varying degrees to the Christian message, but do not take seriously what they hear. Others go further, trying to listen and take their faith seriously, but giving up in the face of difficulties – or because they realise just what true faith really asks of them. To be fruitful, Jesus says, we must *abide in him, and he in us*. The same idea of abiding is present in today's reading from the first letter of John (4, 18): 'No one has even seen God: if we love one another, *God lives in us*'.

What does this really mean? To abide in Christ underlines our *dependence* – it is no use relying on our own strength, or what we perceive to be our own strength when everything is going well. This can be an unwelcome message in modern, relatively affluent societies which tend to breed individualism rather than community. For many people the idea of accepting dependence symbolises weakness and failure. But in the Christian life acceptance of dependence is, paradoxically, the very beginning of strength.

Dependence means more than anything that we need continuing *contact*: 'No man is an island' as John Donne famously said. For many people the current pandemic has brought this home as never before. Those with a wide circle of friends and a lively social life suddenly realise their dependence on these things which they normally take for granted. Those for whom family is central feel acutely the inability to see grandchildren. Those in care homes are particularly deprived as they cannot see and hug their loved ones. The total disruption of family and friendship networks has affected the mental health of many and brought home to us all the reality of our mutual interdependence. We need and depend on other people in terms of material help, friendship and simply human contact. And in the past year it has been wonderful to see just how many have responded to these needs, individually and through neighbourhood and community initiatives, bringing help and assistance to those who are most vulnerable.

In the same way, as Christians, we need to keep in contact with the roots of the vine. This demands time: private time, certainly, but also time together with those who share our faith. It is through the church and through worship that we keep in contact with the vine, with other branches which themselves bear fruit and act as an inspiration for us to do the same. To think that we can do without the church and manage on our own – as most people do today, including many who still regard themselves as Christian – is a mistake. Either we are Christians in community, or not at all. As the first letter of Peter (2, 5) puts it, 'Come and let yourselves be built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple'. Of course, we all have our reservations about the church as an institution – it is made up of human beings with all their strengths and weaknesses, and the more closely we are involved the more clearly we see it, warts and all – but also the more closely we realise just how much hard work and devotion on the part of so many people goes into making it function. A close relationship brings understanding and acceptance, the willingness to work together – in church as in the community, workplace or family – making the best of one another's strengths and coping constructively with one another's weaknesses.

Contact with the church family, as branches of the vine, should be no recipe for cosy introversion, as it is sometimes perceived to be by outsiders. The branches that bear fruit do so not only within the church but in the world outside. The church has been described as the only institution that exists for those who are not members. A true Christian family is by its very nature one that is open and outward-looking – a vine that is well-tended and healthy. Many of us, perhaps most of us, will have found or at least sustained our faith through knowing other Christians and through the influence of their lives. In various ways we have *depended* on them. So, let us always remember, do others *depend* on us.