

## The Vine

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Rob Gilbert* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2012.

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Any among you who have a farming background or who enjoy gardens or gardening, whether you are primarily interested in plants that produce food or in plants that are decorative, will be powerfully aware that fruit, like the fruit of the vine in today's Gospel reading, comes from blossom. I want to begin by exploring the analogy Jesus makes between the vine and the branches – he the vine, we the branches – and by reflecting on the fact that for the branches to be fruitful they have to blossom first.

The branches of a vine have a freedom that perhaps the branches of a standard tree do not. Trees branch regularly and put out solid, hard branches, but the branches of a vine stretch out, and they can bend and extend themselves in unpredictable ways. The branches of a vine also put out tendrils, which they use to reach distant supports so that they can grow further out and make more of themselves. So Jesus's use of the image of the vine is particularly inspired because it emphasises the freedom of the branch to grow, to extend itself, to climb. It's a freedom he is saying that we have in him, if he is the vine and we are the branches. To be part of the vine – part of the body of Christ – is not to fit into one set of behaviours or another, or to be required to think one thing or another, but to have a freedom to grow, to blossom and as a result to be fruitful.

That's the first thing I think we should take from today's Gospel. The second builds on it by looking at the freedom that the branches of the vine have and noting their individuality, how each branch does something a little bit different. Without a rigid pre-determined pattern to follow, each branch makes the best it can of itself, but within the vine as a whole. So in this metaphor of the vine and its branches the individuality of each branch is not overwhelmed by the vine of which they are a part. Quite the opposite in fact – the freedom of the branch on the vine is given to it as part of the whole plant, the branch has its individuality as part of the whole. So when it is said that the Father is the vine-grower and Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, what is being spoken about is our individual value and the individual value of the ways we flourish – the ways we flower – and the ways we are fruitful. If you like, what is being spoken about is the fact that not only is God love, but that God loves every one of us individually. This is an insight we heard powerfully echoed in our reading from the first letter of John – God *is* love, and love is primarily a matter of God loving us as individuals, and this gives us the capacity to love ourselves.

As the vine gives individual life to its branches, as God gives us our individual lives, we are reminded that if we blossom and produce fruit ourselves then we are able to give rise to yet more life from ourselves, in others and in the world. This is a third feature of Jesus saying that we are the branches and he is the vine – that fruit produces the seeds of new individuality, new freedom, beyond the individual branch on which the fruit grew. The vine image reminds us how God loves us and how that love is specific to each of us, that God's love gives us individual life. The seed in the fruit reminds us how if we love in turn then we will produce the fruits of love and give rise to more love from ourselves, more specific love of those around us that helps them to blossom and be fruitful.

There is also what seems a harsh note in Jesus's saying about himself as the true vine and we as the branches. Branches that are not part of the true vine, he says, are thrown away and burnt on the garden fire. I wonder though if we can't see it in a different way when we think of it in the context of the whole analogy of ourselves as branches with freedom to be ourselves, to flower, to be fruitful and to seed new life. Perhaps Jesus is just pointing out that if someone doesn't allow themselves to flourish – to flower – and from that flowering to produce fruit, their own distinctive fruits, then there is a sense in which they are separating themselves from life, a sense in which they are *allowing themselves* to wither. But Jesus also encourages us by pointing out that the vine-grower will prune branches to enable them to become more fruitful. So his warning is an encouragement to blossom and be fruitful in our individual ways, and to allow the pruning out of what does not make us flourish and so allow us to be more fruitful. In fact, Jesus himself turns around his saying about the fire at the end of the reading, refocusing on the simple claim that if someone allows themselves to flourish – to flower –

and so to become fruitful then just in doing that, just in being themselves, they glorify God. It reminds me of the well-known saying of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop Irenaeus: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

If the vine is there to allow the branches to flower, to be fruitful and to seed new life then this should give us confidence to be glad about the skills and gifts and abilities that are signs of our flourishing. It should give us confidence that our gifts are welcome, whatever they are and however slight they might seem. And there’s one other thing about vines that I want to pick up here, and that is the way each branch produces fruit with a range of shapes and sizes and different shades of colour. The patterning of bloom on the grape fruit makes them each slightly different, with a dappled appearance and their colour varying in tone. One of the glorious things about human beings fully alive is that they are all different from each other, and we know that even our own lives have different aspects to them. Well, this story of the vine and its fruitful branches tells us that every aspect of our lives that is good and creative is a sign of our flourishing, gladdens God and glorifies God.

The repeated word that refers to the branches as part of the vine is the word ‘abide’. It is repeated to even greater effect in the reading we had from the first letter of John. In both the Gospel and the epistle ‘abide’ gives a poetic and meditative character to the text. Another translation would be ‘remain’, and the word ‘abide’ also conjures up in our minds words like ‘reside’ and ‘stay’. To bring our readings together, if we talk about abiding in the vine or abiding in God’s love, we are saying the same thing, which can be characterised as abiding in Jesus – Jesus who is the vine, and Jesus who is the beloved Son of God. What this means for the branches of the vine is that the vine gives them their own lives. What this means about love is that love isn’t something *we give*, it’s something – or not a thing at all, really – that *gives us*. That is what it means to abide in God’s love and to abide in Christ the vine. The vine *gives us* life, *makes us* blossom, *allows us* to be fruitful. So in the end there is something very practical about the images we are given today. They remind us that love is not something particularly spiritual or emotional or related to feeling, the way people often think, it is what gives each of us to each other. It is what transforms our physical lives beside one another into a life together in community like the branches of a vine.

Amen.