

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Easter 4 (year B)

Genesis 22:1-18

Psalm 22:25-end

Acts 8:26-end

John 15:1-8

In speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

For me the week that has just passed has been full of PCC meetings to review and approve the accounts for the last year and to consider the financial implications for the year to come. No doubt like organisations and charities across the country, after a year in which fund raising and visitor donations were curtailed by the pandemic, our conversations focused on how we can create more sustainable patterns of income for the future. These conversations are part of my wider reflection on how we create sustainable patterns of church activity which enable churches, small as we might be, to flourish. With the echo of all the conversations in my mind, today's gospel is a powerful gift.

It reminds us that all we seek to do and be as individuals and as a community of faith, a church body, is not sustained by our own efforts, and does not need to be dreamt up by us alone, in fact will it will not be terribly helpful if we do our planning and dreaming in isolation.

I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower.

Like the image of the shepherd last week, there is a long Biblical heritage of God's people being the vine that God tends for fruitfulness. Here Jesus is saying that he is the true person of God – the person in whom not only is God revealed, but God's desired relationship with God's people is shown: Jesus is the true vine, tended by the Father and displaying in human life, our full potential for fruitfulness.

That means he allows the Father to remove in his life what is not fruitful, and prune for greater abundance all that is.

Abide in me as I abide in you.

Jesus tells his disciples that his life is something he shares with them in intimate relationship: he call us to abide in him, to take up residence, pitch our tent, rest in him; and he will truly share his life in us, abide in us, take up

residence, pitch his tent, rest in us. This is deeply mysterious language, and it is something we have to explore in prayer and notice in our worship together – this uniting presence of Jesus amongst us and within us.

Alongside this mysterious language he uses another metaphor from the vine.

Just as a branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine and you are the branches.

And this brings us where we need to start when we are seeking to live sustainable lives both as individuals and in our corporate life.

Where is the source of our life and energy: it is the vine from which we are branches.

Just think of all the extending plants we see bursting into life around us this spring – without being connected to the root system and stem or trunk, without the nutrients and water branches need, no survival, let alone fruitfulness is possible. I wonder if you can hold in your imagination that connection between the branch and the trunk and roots, how utterly essential and how life giving that connection is for the branch. And can we make the imaginative leap for ourselves and notice where our lives feel sustained and enlivened, energised when we recognise our full dependence on God, our sharing in the life-giving love of the Trinity which is what Jesus offers us when he says: abide in me. Becoming aware of this sustenance, this fruit producing energy is literally vital to knowing the fullness of life that our faith is offering. Just as Jesus so often draws images from nature to help us understand what he is teaching – it may be that spending time wondering at the abundance of the natural world around us at this time which might help us get more fully in touch with this gift of God which is alive in us too. Abide with God in nature, or in any other gift around us, music, art, the love of family, the smile of a child... whatever it is for you that feels like drawing water and nutrients from the vine of which you are a branch.

So we are offered a source of life in Jesus to sustain us.

But we are not then left to grow on our own. Without the life source we wilt and die, but sometimes with the life force we can over-extend or pour our energy into what is not fruitful, and the vinegrower wants the life in us to be for flourishing and fruit.

So, the vinegrower prunes to enhance fruitfulness.

I find this really interesting. Many of you as gardeners will know the importance of pruning in creating a flourishing garden, but I wonder whether we apply it in other areas of life, and in acceptance of our situation in whatever season of life we find ourselves now.

One of the pieces of spiritual wisdom that St Ignatius of Loyola drew from observing himself and others is that in people whose lives are directed towards God, who desire to respond to God's love in the service and love of those around them, the influence that Ignatius calls the enemy of human nature (all the temptations that draw us away from God) will usually be found in the temptation to try to do too much and to become disheartened by failure or drained into exhaustion. He encouraged his friends to listen again to what God is truly calling them to now and not be distracted by other good things that are good in themselves but not the calling for today. Can we let God prune all our good intentions to free us to use our energy for joyful, loving, activity which really is the fruit of the life abiding in Jesus brings us? Can we let him prune all the wilt and mildew that anxiety about what we can't do brings?

As background reading for this reflection I glanced at some RHS guidance on growing grapes:

Remove all flowers for the first two years after planting.

Allow three bunches of grapes on three-year-old vines and about five on a four-year-old vine – slightly more if growing well. Allow full cropping thereafter.

What struck me about it was that it is guidance focused on allowing the plant to be fully rooted and sustained – roots, vine sustaining well-nourished branches, before the intensity of fruiting is allowed. Then there is a period of restricted fruiting as sustenance and fruitfulness are kept in balance until the plant is strong enough to become fully abundant.

I wonder where I am, you are, each of our churches are on God's growing plan?

Do we need to receive more sustenance from abiding in Jesus?

Perhaps we need to let God show us the three bunches of fruit that it is important that grow on our branches now?

How will we grow in strength and discerning wisdom to enable us to bear fruit in the place we have been planted and to celebrate the harvest God receives in us?

Perhaps this week is a good time to reflect on these questions and ask for God's grace at whichever stage we are.

Our Father and vinegrower,

Grant us the felt experience of the abiding of Jesus in us, and us in him.

Help us to recognise what needs your pruning in our lives and receive that pruning gladly.

Let us glimpse your glory as we bear the abundance of fruit in which you delight.

Amen