



March Team Ministry

March Team St John, St Mary, St Peter, St Wendreda

Welcome

Fifth Sunday of Easter ~ 2nd May 2021

Please keep in touch with one another, and I am always glad to hear from you on 01354 279232 or at andrew.marchurch@gmail.com

Ascension Day Service 7pm St John's 13th May

We have Church services with social distancing, and also, for the foreseeable future, our zooming, emailing and leaflet deliveries. As we move through the various stages of unlocking, we will be re-viewing church life, hoping for some things to come back, some to be delayed for the time being and some to move on or cease.

**St Peter's Sundays 8am & 11am; Wednesdays 10am
St Mary's Sundays 9.15am
St John's Sundays 9.30am; Tuesdays 10am**

"Stay in touch, take care, keep safe, continue praying and God bless."

Prayers

O God, you graft us on to Christ, the true vine and, with endless care, you nurture our growth in knowledge and reverence. Tend the vineyard of your Church, that in Christ each branch may bring forth to the glory of your name abundant fruits of faith and love. Grant this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

God of deep soil and luxuriant growth; you call us from our shallow selves to find our depth in you: may we abide in him alone who can teach us who we are; through Jesus Christ, the true vine. Amen.

Gospel of John 15 v1-8

Jesus said to his disciples; 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Meditation

Last week sheep, this week vines! Now, I know no more about growing vines than I do about tending sheep, the closest my experience, being me, is wearing woollen jumpers or drinking wine! And I am more of a beer man, usually only drinking wine for work purposes, and at present very painfully conscious that we are not sharing the chalice. I know many of us are longing for the return of many things, and find it difficult to believe that after June 21st all will return. As soon as regulations allow we will restore the cup, but in character with what we have been doing over the last year, I want to make it clear that no one should feel pressurised into receiving it, and some may choose to receive only the bread until they feel it is safe to go further.

During these times we have been able to omit the words “Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread” whilst we have been required to use individual bread portions and so have not, in a physical sense, been sharing one bread or receiving broken bread, and have had to live with the ambiguity and possible contradiction of proclaiming “Drink this, all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many...” whilst in a physical sense not all of us drinking, so it has often felt to me that we are constraining or limiting Christ’s action and that our actions are falling short of Christ’s words. But, then again, compared to some of the many other limitations we are needing to live with, perhaps I should not worry so much! But let us not lose sight that the fruit of the vine is at the heart of our worship.

Back to our reading about vines. At first reading there seems to be an awful lot about pruning, cutting off, and fiery disposal. Is this a reading about how God discards people, perhaps in an eternal sense, and perhaps to a fiery destination? If so, that would make me, and many people, very uncomfortable about exactly what sort of God we were expected to worship; hardly one of love. The vine-grower removes the fruitless branches, and prunes the ones that do bear fruit so that they bear more. Those branches that are not connected to the main root of the vine cannot bear fruit. Some branches have withered and so are removed, and can only be of use as firewood.

But yesterday, re-reading what John actually wrote, the first thing that struck me is in the first image. Jesus says he is the vine, and then adds that his Father is the vine-grower. The vine-grower trims and prunes the vine. The Father trims and prunes the Son, “He removes every branch in me...” Then the consequences of this trimming and pruning are made clear for us, “You have already been cleansed”. Now in John’s language, Greek, the word “cleansed” is almost identical to “pruned” (only one letter different). So John seems to be saying that the disciples are already pruned, and therefore can bear fruit as long as they abide in Christ, just as the pruned branch bears fruit as long as it remains connected to the vine’s roots. The disciples are reminded that they are the branches and will bear much fruit, but if they become disconnected they will not be fruitful, and will wither and fall off.

We may see that when John talks of the Father pruning the Son, he is not so much talking about pruning Jesus of Nazareth, as pruning the body of Christ on earth, namely the Church. Paul often talks in terms of the body of Christ, whilst John often prefers to talk of abiding in Christ. Abiding, living with, dwelling with, going camping with. Or here, remaining part of, being connected to, being rooted in, or having the same relationship that a branch has with the stem and root of a vine. Pruning is not destructive or punishing, it is enabling new growth, new life, to flourish and to be fruitful.

It is possible to read this passage thinking there are, and making a distinction between, two types of branches mentioned; those that are pruned, and those that are removed and thrown away. So it can be read that some people are pruned and so bear fruit, and other people are condemned to the flames.

It is also possible to see the pruning and the removal of dead wood as steps to ensure a healthy and fruitful whole plant. This brings me back to my earlier observation; “He (the Father) removes every branch in me (Jesus Christ) that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” This, surely, is not saying that the Father disowns or destroys part of his Son, rather that the very nature of the Father is to aid and assist the Son to bring forth fruitful new life.

It is always hard for the compilers of readings for Sunday services to know exactly where to start and finish, but I think the next few verses take us on, and remind us that to abide in Christ is to abide in love, and to experience true joy. So, maybe, John confirms my instinct that that we have already been cleansed, and are now pruned for fruitful life. So, maybe, John confirms my instinct that a God who condemns people to eternal fire is not a God of love or joy, or indeed worthy to be worshipped, but that abiding in the God of love brings real joy.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Prayers

To Christ the Lamb who was slain, and who lives now in the glory of the Father, let us lift our voices in praise: risen Lord, we bless you, alleluya!

Lord Jesus, you are the Amen, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead. You are Alpha and Omega, the one who is, and was, and who is to come. You search into the thoughts and affections of all your people:

risen Lord, we bless you, alleluya!

You reprove and chasten those whom you love: in your paschal victory, you have proclaimed the coming of the kingdom: risen Lord, we bless you, alleluya!

On this day that the Lord has made, let us pray for the people he has redeemed.

That we may live as those who believe in the triumph of the cross.

That all people may receive the good news of his victory:

That those born to new life in the waters of baptism may know the power of his resurrection:

That those who suffer pain and anguish may find wholeness and peace in the wounds of Christ.

That in the undying love of Christ we may be united with all who have died in the faith of Christ:

Let us commend the world, in which Christ rose from the dead, to the mercy and protection of God.

Christ you are risen with the sun; you are a light in our darkness, warmth in our cold. You are peace and hope and joy, for you went willingly to death.

You turned defeat and failure to victory for all. You live eternally, and with you live the millions, living and dead, who trust in you.

Amen

Acts of the Apostles 8 v26-40

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.