

Tidenham and Tutshill 28/4/24

## John 15: 1-8 – Becoming a Fruitful Vine

Prayer

Hands – these are not the hands of a gardener – they are far too soft, and you know there is one gardener in my family, and that's Anna. But I do know this – that if you want to get good fruit on a plant, and especially a vine – it needs good and careful pruning. I recall someone who has a vine telling me that without pruning the vine would produce terrific growth, but it would be all leaf and no fruit. At which point I'm going to move from viniculture, horticulture before I show up my ignorance, and look at our Gospel reading – Jesus said, *I am the vine and my Father is the gardener*. Jesus – talking to his disciples – was tapping into two things here. All the disciples knew vines and probably had a basic knowledge of what they needed to thrive. So when Jesus talked about pruning them, he wasn't telling them something they didn't know. And secondly Jesus was tapping into a very rich vein from the Old Testament where the vine was a common picture for the people of Israel. It's in the Psalms, in Isaiah. You can google it if you want to know more. But nearly always the point of the passages where the vine stands for the people of Israel is to say that it's a pretty hopeless vine – not producing any fruit. The people of God in the Old Testament kept falling short, a long way short of being the people God was calling them to be. They were not godly witnesses to other nations; they weren't shining examples at all. Time after time the prophets were saying – *you don't look any different from anyone else*.

So when Jesus comes along and says *I am the true vine*, he is saying something quite remarkable. He is the one who fulfils all that Israel was called to be. The Old Testament is the story of how God's people fell short of being just that, God's people. Jesus on the other hand was perfectly the one who shows God's character and nature, his love, his mercy, his values, sometimes his anger at wrong doing and sharp words as well. If you want to know what God is like, who God is, look at Jesus.

Jesus develops this in verse 5 – he repeats *I am the vine* but changes the focus from the Father God as the gardener – to *you are the branches*. Suddenly we're in the picture, we're involved. When I was putting this together on Friday Anna walked by the window with two branches – she'd just collected them from the wood for some purpose in the garden. They'll never produce anything – broken off, cut off from the root, dead. *Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me*. It's that relationship with Jesus that means we can begin to fulfil the calling to be God's people in T, Chepstow. When we have pictures like this one in the Bible it can set us off in different directions, some of which may be fruitful.

For instance when Jesus says *you are the branches*, the word *you* is plural. A Christian is someone who belongs to God's people. A solitary Christian is a contradiction in terms. WE can unpack that because sometimes people say that *you don't have to go to church to be a Christian*. And in one sense, that's right, because just going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than me having my study in the old garage doesn't make me a car! We become a Christian through faith, through putting our trust in Jesus and having a personal relationship with him. When we become Christians we are joined up with everyone else who is a Christian too – we are part of the vine. In practice this means joining in with other Christian believers and associating with them, with us, and that's not easy. Some people think that the church should be full of nice people, but the reality is that there are at least one or two of us who struggle to be what God looks for and we keep falling short of the mark. It's understandable that there are those who are disillusioned and drop out, and that's a pity and possibly a mistake and even disobedience because Jesus said to stick with him. No

one ever said or thought it's easy to be in a church where everyone falls short just like we do, but we are in it together – with Jesus.

That's one direction; here's another one. *I am the vine, you are the branches*. Being a Christian is about being incorporated into something that was there before us and is vastly bigger than us. It's not just our personal lifestyle choice; it goes much deeper than that. Last week Anna and I had a delightful time in the Pyrenees in France and we visited a hermit's chapel that is built in a cleft in a gorge. Getting there put our own cardiac hill up to Tidenham church into perspective. It gave us that sense of belonging – *Rock of ages, cleft for me...*

Haven't been in the south of France in April before but Anna and I both noticed how the vines had almost without exception been pruned recently, and how radical that pruning had been. At first we wondered if they had been newly planted they were so trim and small. That – and this passage – set me off thinking about pruning, and the point of pruning is not just to cut away but to shape the plant for its purpose of bearing fruit. Verse 2 – *every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit*.

So that leaves us thinking – if we are the branches and the Father prunes so we can bear more fruit, what does that actually mean? What is God's purpose for his people, for us here in T, Forest, Chepstow area? That's a pretty big question and it's one we'll need to think about as we move into a vacancy and look for a new vicar. Let's come at the question sideways. So much around us tells us that we need to be ourselves, to be authentically me. On Saturday morning we get a physical newspaper rather than just on-line, and that message about affirming and establishing our identity is a common theme through articles and adverts and stories and reviews. And there's a good deal of truth in it – I mean whoever wants to be inauthentic? No, that's not it. The trouble is that the message *Be yourself* slips so easily into *Please yourself*. *Be authentically* you can slide into *be self-centred*. What about *be the person God wants you to be*? If that's what we concentrate on, then we will become the person we truly are, but only if we keep them in that order. *Abide in me*, says Jesus, *as I abide in you*. We need to cultivate our relationship with Jesus. What else can he mean?

Maybe this is where pruning comes in. It can be a bit of a drag coming to church every week, especially when there are other things we could be doing. How do we fit a time for prayer and reading God's word and a helpful Christian book into the busy lives we lead? Maybe pruning some of the things that are good in themselves but don't allow us time for a decent prayer life? We might all want to ask what the Father wants to prune from our lives.

Or think again about this very rich picture of pruning. Pruning is about loss and it can be painful. We might be aware of loss in our lives – not just people we have loved and lost, but opportunities lost, ambitions unfulfilled, the future we had envisioned gone... pruning perhaps. Such things happen to all of us but what do we do with them? We can become full of regret, bitter and resentful even, or we can allow God to use these things to shape us, so we can become more useful in God's Kingdom, more fruitful to use the language of our passage. What do the hard things that happen to us – do to us? They might make us angry or anxious or turn us inward, or maybe over time and with help perhaps, make us more compassionate and understanding towards others? How is God shaping us?

And that brings me to my final – and you'll be glad to know – brief point, picking up on a single word in verse 8 – *My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples*. Which word? The word *become* – I'm glad Jesus didn't say *be* my disciples, but *become* – that's a getting there word, not got there. It's the fashionable thing to say, I know, but true in this case – we are all on a journey of becoming Jesus' disciples. And on this journey there are things that are distractions,

things that can knock us off balance and things that can feed us and encourage us on the way. I rather hope that being here today is one of the latter – feeding and encouraging us on our way to becoming Jesus' disciples, bearing much fruit. Or as our poem had it:

*What might it mean to bide and to abide  
In such rich love as makes the poor heart glad?*

Prayer