



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Life Connection with Jesus

John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

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The gospel reading is set after the Last Supper. They have already left the Upper Room on their way to the Mount of Olives across the valley from Jerusalem. On the way, they would pass the temple compound. A Jew of the first century called Josephus wrote an extensive history of the Jewish people in which he twice mentioned that there was a golden grapevine over the portal of the temple. It was huge. Josephus wrote:

[Over the doors] was spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the size and fine workmanship of which was a surprising sight to the spectators...¹

“The clusters of grapes on that golden vine were as tall as the height of a man.”²

It seems reasonable that as Jesus passed this golden vine with his disciples that he would use it as an illustration.

The grapevine was an important symbol for Israel throughout their history. It appears in scripture; it appeared in carvings; it was on their coins. Some of the accounts in scripture relate to Israel being God’s vineyard and not producing the fruit which was expected.

So as Jesus walked he recasts the imagery. Now he is the vine - the true vine – the real vine. Israel failed to produce the fruit expected but, he said, “I am the reality.”

I am the vine, you are the branches. I will give you life and energy. I will flow through you and produce fruit through you if you remain in me.

Connection

The heart of the parable is connection. We need to be connected to him. He used the word remain or abide eleven times in this chapter.

How does a branch draw life from the stem? It is the sap rising from the roots through the stem which supplies the branches. We have all seen a branch broken off a tree – the leaves wither, the wood dies, it dries out.

So Jesus said, remain in me and I will remain in you. Sometimes it is translated abide or live in me and I will live in you. One translation renders it “remain in life-union with me.”

¹ Antiquities of the Jews 15:395

² The Jewish War 5:210

And it really is vital! We could liken it to being on a heart-lung machine, without those tubes the patient would die. We could liken it to the electrical system in your house – cut off the main switch and every appliance in your house is useless – dead.

So Jesus said, "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." [verse 5]

The reading from John's First Epistle covers parallel ground. Take verse 15-16 for example:

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

I wonder if we could extend the metaphor and say that the love of God is like the sap which flows to the branches? Receiving the love of God is life giving to us. We "know and rely on the love God has for us." At the same time, God expects us to allow that love to flow on through us to others.

Verses 19 & 21: We love because he first loved us. ... ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

The single most important thing is to cultivate an intimate, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ individually and together as the Body of Christ. That was the kind of life Jesus had with the Father while He was here on the earth. It is an intimate love relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

The Purpose of the Vine is to bear Fruit

The thrust of the vine metaphor is that the vine should bear fruit – that is its purpose. Vintners or vine growers are very practical people – they don't grow vines as ornament - they want grapes.

So what might be the fruit, God desires from his people?

Fruit has two purposes: It is food and it carries the seeds. Animals or humans eat the fruit and spread the pips which then can grow and develop the next generation. That is what all fruit does on plants.

We show the fruit of living in Him, carry the seed of the word to people. They are attracted by the pleasant fruit (love, joy peace etc) and that gives the seed of divine life new ground to grow in. Fruit in our lives makes the gospel attractive to unbelievers.

I think that the sort of fruit Jesus is looking for is people's lives being transformed by the power of the Gospel, people being saved and set on the road to eternity, people being loved and cared for, having God's love showered over them. I think that fruit is people being made disciples, being led and taught and encouraged to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, follow the teachings of Jesus, becoming Christ-like in every aspect of their lives. The fruit God is looking for is a changed society, reformed from its greed and selfishness and things that hurt and destroy. The fruit is the Kingdom of God, the realm of love, a world of peace and forgiveness – that's the sort of fruit. It is fruit which is sweet and nourishing and also spreads the seeds of this God-life.

Pruning

But Jesus also introduces into the analogy the essential practice of viticulture – pruning.

John 15:2 reads, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit."

So what might pruning of church look like? It doesn't sound very nice does it? First let's go back to the real vine. Vines are pruned every year for maximum cropping.

Grapes have to be pruned so the branches are supported and separated so the leaves have good exposure to the sun and the grapes can develop hanging freely. Some branches are unproductive and will be removed to maximise the return from more promising branches. Some are headed in the wrong direction and must be redirected onto the support structure for best results – this training is also part of pruning.

In 1997, we decided to go to England for just 6 months on a work transfer. On the Sunday I received clear guidance from the Bible that we should go, a parishioner also prophesied to me that God was going to prune me. I didn't really like the thought of that – I hoped it would not be too painful.

We went to England and as you know our stay was extended and became indefinite. At that point, I became homesick. At a conference, a stranger came to me and told me that I was in England to be trained in healing ministry by Mike Clarkson. We had not met and he did not know that Mike was my vicar. Well, I was trained and extended by Mike in ministry and then of course trained for ordination. On my last Sunday in England, another Vicar, who knew me but did not know the story I have just told you, came to me and said, you have been in England to be trained and are now to go back to New Zealand to bear fruit. My mind went back to those words, "... every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

I was amazed at how those various prophetic words traced a course and explained what was happening. But do you see how the pruning was to extend me. It was certainly literally training. The cutting off was perhaps from the familiar and from the responsibilities I had at that time in New Zealand to a different focus in England.

I guess there are other possible ways of pruning. If we harbour resentments, bitterness, selfishness or other fleshly characteristics which are not the fruit of the Spirit He may bring about circumstances to help us be rid us of those things.

Our purpose – to bear fruit

Our purpose is simple – to bear fruit. We need to bear the sweetness of character and carry the seed of the word to allow the true life of Jesus to spread to more people.

How might that be? Jesus has already told us. Remain in him, draw life from him. Stay close. Let the love of God flow into you and on out of you to others. If I can push the analogy of the sap being that love we might think of some trees which leak sap as honey dew or in the case of maples as the sweet sap from which we get maple syrup. There the sap has risen to the branches but it now passed out to others. So the love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts needs to be allowed out to others around us.

So receive the power, the life, the sustenance that comes from Jesus through his living Holy Spirit. Stay close. Stay connected – through prayer. Receive the Holy Spirit and walk and act in the power of the Spirit. If you don't know much about walking in the power of the Spirit, the four sessions coming up starting this Tuesday will give practical instruction – why not join in and learn?

Church we need always to receive and give out the love of God, to let the the fruit of the Holy Spirit be produced in this church. Only Jesus living in us can do it. God expects to see love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, and self-control – this is Christ-likeness.

I hope that's your desire – to be Christ-like and to be fruitful. It comes through surrender of self, standing strong against the temptations of sin, sticking close to Jesus through prayer and His Word, sticking close with your fellow believers and drawing on the power, the cleansing and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ With acknowledgement to Colin Lane, Mornington Salvation Army – "I am the True Vine"

https://websites.sportstg.com/assoc_page.cgi?c=1-7984-0-0-0&SID=186818&news_task=DETAIL&articleID=19729876

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