

## **Sermon for Sunday 2 May 2021 - Bearing Fruit**

Readings: Acts 8: 26-40 and John 15: 1-8

Today we are going to be thinking about Jesus' call for us to bear fruit for Christ - by being intimately connected with him and with his other followers.

In today's gospel reading we heard the continuation of Jesus' long conversation with his disciples after the Last Supper. In this particular part of the conversation, Jesus talked of God being a gardener and Jesus himself as the true vine. He likened his followers to the branches in the vine.

Last week Jean told us of Jesus' claim 'I am the good shepherd'. In today's reading he says 'I am the true vine' and this is the last of 7 'I am' statements in John's gospel. The phrase 'I am' harks back to the book of Exodus when God told Moses 'I am who I am' and the powerful words 'I am' became synonymous with God.

The saying 'I am the true vine' reminds us that God as a loving gardener tends his vine carefully and gives it all the attention it needs in order that it fulfils its potential and bears fruit - for that is the purpose of a vine - to bear grapes

I'm sure that the owners of vineyards in Jesus' time and in ours, were and are expert in caring for their vines so that they bear grapes of the best possible quality. They would ensure that the vines are planted firmly and in the right place, that they are well watered and fed and that they are pruned regularly.

In the same way, God tends to the needs of his followers and is always present with us, whether we're aware of it or not. He is with us in our joys and our grieving, and every circumstance in between. He feeds and nurtures us and, possibly less attractive to us, he prunes us. This can be a painful process which we'd rather he didn't do, but pruning is necessary if we are to be the people he wants us to be as pruning cuts out the parts in us which prevent us from bearing fruit.

If we are to flourish as Jesus' followers we need to stay attached to him as the source of life, to remain in his love and to draw from him the nourishment and sustenance needed to live life to the full.

When we trust God and follow Jesus we are promised an intimate family relationship of loving nurture and care. We are also able to enjoy being part of an extended family with other believers, those other branches in the vine, growing together in love.

When Jesus was talking to his followers in this reading, he was facing his own death on the cross. He was sending out his followers to tell others the message of God's love. He told them to bear fruit. In order to bear fruit his followers, then and now, need to be connected to God through Jesus, feed on God's word in the scriptures and feed on the Holy Spirit which enables us to receive the gifting we need in order to serve.

It is evident from the book of Acts that, following Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers did indeed live out their lives in love as they established the early Church. The ministry of the early church, acting in obedience to Jesus' call and direction, grew and flourished as many thousands of people came to faith in Jesus, people

were healed, delivered from sinful lives, and possessions were shared. The ministry also attracted persecution from the Jewish authorities who were jealous of the growth of the church and this led to the scattering of the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

One of the newly appointed leaders, Philip, acted in obedience to Jesus' direction given through an angel and proceeded to the road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza where he met an important Ethiopian official. Being a follower of Jesus, Philip was connected to the vine which resourced him to carry out his ministry and to produce fruit.

The official had been to Jerusalem to worship God as he shared the Jewish faith with the people of Israel. He was reading the scriptures, a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. Philip appeared at just the right time to help the official to understand the scriptures. As a result of Philip's obedience to Jesus' call and direction he was able to lead the official to a living faith in Jesus and then to baptize him. Then Philip disappeared to begin another mission in Azotus. Philip had remained in the vine, he had made a connection with another potential believer and he had helped the vine to grow when a new follower came to faith in Christ.

As Christians we are called to remain connected to the vine – Jesus - and we too are given the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us to overcome our human failings and limitations and to live in the truth.

We are to remain in Christ as the vine and we are to love one another. How will this 'remaining in Christ' and 'loving one another' impact on each of our lives today?

- ◇ We can consider the areas where God is nourishing us and in which we are growing. Let's thank God for those areas and ask him to lead us deeper into him;
- ◇ There will be areas where we feel that God is pruning us, perhaps painful areas. Let's seek God's will for our lives and ask him to give us the strength to cope with the pain and loss. We might like to take the opportunity to talk about our pain with Christian friends or church leaders and to seek prayerful support;
- ◇ We should consider how best to remain in the true vine and not allow ourselves to be separated from him. Let's pray that we won't be distracted in our faith journey but keep our eyes and hearts fixed on him. We could encourage each other within our services in church, in our home groups and in other groups within the church;
- ◇ There will always be difficulties in relationships with other members of the vine because we are all different. Have we fallen out with others in the church family? Let's seek God's forgiveness and healing and let's work with that person or people to restore the relationship to what it should be.

If we want to experience God's love – or to experience more of it – we only have to ask. God promises to answer us when we pray in Jesus' name. When we pray we're, in effect, knocking on God's door. God promises that he listens and will answer. We can rely on his love today and for ever when we remain, or are rooted, in his love and as a consequence we are able to bear fruit for God's kingdom.

Amen.