

Reflection 25th April 2021 – Famous last words

By Rev Steve Painting

John 15:1-8, Acts 8:26-40

Just before I went to Bristol to commence training for ministry a friend took me aside to encourage me with the words we've just read from John 15:1-8. These words, and the ones that follow in next Sunday's reading, had already been at the centre of significant moments in my personal journey of faith. I believe though that they, and the whole section of John 13-17, are not just for my benefit, but should be close to the heart of anyone who wishes to live as a follower of Jesus. John 13-16 conveys the last teaching of Jesus to his disciples and chapter 17 records his last prayers for his followers, present and future, prior to his death and resurrection. These are Jesus' famous last words and last words are important because they are the ones that tend to stick in the memory. We remember the last words of loved ones or famous individuals. When writing books or delivering lectures and sermons it is important to have a good conclusion that succinctly and memorably summarises the content that has gone before. This is what Jesus is doing here and his central message focusses on connection and relationship. By the end of John 15 we should be in no doubt, that close connection to him is the essential element of what it means to be his disciple. Remaining in Him or being at one with him is what it's all about, to the point where it informs the very identity of the disciple.

To illustrate the point Jesus uses the analogy of a vine. 'I am the vine and you are the branches' (verse 5). From my window I am fortunate to be able to see many trees. I don't though remember looking at any of them and thinking, 'there's a lovely branch.' It is the whole tree that I appreciate. The branches are part of the whole. In some way

Jesus' disciples are to be part of him and integral to his being. There is a deeper symbolism going on here too. The vine was regarded as a symbol of Israel. The identity of the disciples would have been tied up with being of Israel. Jesus is here claiming to be the true Israel. It is no longer connection with Israel that defines someone as a person of God, but connection with Jesus, and that is essential for two main reasons that Jesus identifies in his illustration, and that I'd like to focus on now.

Relationship with Jesus is necessary for life

'If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned' (verse 6).

I have a willow tree in the Rectory garden and each year following the winter storms there are lots of dead branches lying around on the ground that must be picked up before I can cut the grass. I will maybe get round to burning them at some point, as is the case with the disconnected vine branches in Jesus' analogy. Whether however, I burn them or not, the discarded branches are no longer of any use to the tree itself and will wither and die along with all the branches from other trees, piled up at the bottom of my garden.

Relationship with Jesus then is crucial, not only as the way to life in the age to come, but also to find the fullness of this life that is afforded to Jesus' disciples. Connection with God is part of what it means to be truly human. We are relational beings, and our lives are only complete in connectedness with God, with other people and with the rest of the creation.

Relationship with Jesus is necessary for the disciple to bear fruit

'Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me' (verse 4).

Jesus wants his disciples to have relationship with him in order that they might metaphorically bear fruit. It is an image that Jesus has used in a slightly different way before (Matt 7:15-20). There, Jesus speaks of fruit bearing trees, pointing out that the fruit that grows from the tree is dependent on the identity and nature of the tree itself. 'Grapes do not grow from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles.' 'Likewise,' says Jesus, 'every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.'

Returning to the image of the vine, here in John 15, Jesus is the vine whose branches bear good fruit, fruit consistent with the nature of Jesus himself. Somehow, the disciple who is at one with Jesus, is one who becomes a very real part of Jesus, and shares in his character, mission and purpose. Grapes are the product of a vine and the consequence of its being alive. Interestingly, in the light of Jesus' analogy it is the branches of the vine that bear the fruit. The question that must then follow, is what is that fruit?

To think about this, I'd like to go back to John 14:17. Here Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit. 'You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.' This is the same Spirit that inhabited Jesus throughout his life. If Jesus is the vine then the Spirit is perhaps best imagined as the life-giving sap that runs through the vine. Just as the sap of a vine runs through all its branches so the Holy Spirit flows through all that are in Christ. Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, 'but the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.' These personal characteristics are the fruit, or

the consequence of a life permeated by the Spirit, so when Jesus speaks of bearing fruit, perhaps it is these characteristics that he has in mind. Yet I suspect it goes beyond that. In our rather surreal story from Acts, Philip, empowered in all sorts of ways by the Holy Spirit, witnesses to the Ethiopian official about Jesus. The official on understanding and believing, sees some water and asks to be baptised. Philip baptises him and disappears, but the official is drawn into the life of Jesus, thus extending the kingdom of God and initiating its spread 'to the ends of the earth.' The extension of God's kingdom then, is the fruit of Philip's obedience to the call of the Holy Spirit. It is both the product and evidence of the reality of his remaining in Christ. The church today is also called to bear fruit by working with God to extend his kingdom, and we too cannot be part of that unless we remain in Jesus.

To conclude, authentic discipleship can only be found in relationship with Jesus. Jesus continues his analogy in the next section of John 15 which we will be looking at next Sunday. There he expands on what it means to remain in him, but there is one element from today's passage that I've not yet mentioned. Jesus tells us that 'every branch in him that does bear fruit will be pruned by the Father so that it is even more fruitful' (John 15:2). Pruning removes the parts of a plant that hamper its life and its ability to produce fruit. Pruning is like surgery. Surgery is needed when damaged or diseased parts of the body hamper the life of a person and their ability to function. Jesus is saying here that whether we like it or not, there are parts of our being that need to be removed in order that we live well and bear the fruit of the kingdom of God. The Father, in His own way, will prune those things out of our lives, and in order to remain in the vine we must not get in the way of him doing so.