

**John 15. 1-12**

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 and 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.

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.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

**All you need is Love**

Anyone given the task and privilege of preaching in these post-Easter weeks faces a difficult choice of readings on which to focus. The lectionary gives us a succession of passages from the Acts of the Apostles, which tell the inspiring story of how the early Church emerged as the good news of Christ’s resurrection spread. You might like to read for yourselves today’s passage from chapter 8, which narrates the encounter between Philip and the eunuch – a story of the combined power of the Holy Spirit and the word of God.

Alongside this account of the early Church, we are given readings from John, both his gospel and, this year at least, his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter. Both display his unique style and dominant theme of relationship with Christ. Though containing some beautiful narratives, John’s gospel is first and foremost a work of theology, declaring from start to finish the identity of Jesus as Word of God, in whom is eternal life, a life which is synonymous with love.

All you need is Love! How simple that sounded when we sang along with the Beatles at the top of our young voices. Many decades later, life has taught us that it’s so much more complex and demanding; that love renders us vulnerable; that love often hurts; that love can lead to disappointment and betrayal. We might be tempted to give up and not to take the risk, to keep ourselves to ourselves. Seeing so much heartache and mistrust around us, we could give way to scepticism and ask if the love of God really exists, if faith in such love is just to be found in cloud cuckoo land. Understandable though such thoughts might be, to follow them would be to deny our essential identity as children of God and disciples of Jesus, as we see when we turn to our gospel reading.

I’ve often struggled with John’s language and the sentences that seem to tumble over one another. Only recently has it occurred to me that it’s

easier to follow when set out in more paragraphs or verses, perhaps like a prose poem. You might like to consider the epistle reading for today in such a way. It's 1 John 4.7-21.

"I am the true vine" is one of the 'I am'sayings of Jesus, unique to John's gospel, each one declaring his divinity. Remember the encounter of Moses with the burning bush, when God's voice declared "I am who I am"..... Jesus often says "I am....."

"I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower." Instantly we have a picture of a relationship of mutual dependency. The vine only exists at the will of the grower, but growing the vine is the purpose of the grower.

"I am the vine and you are the branches." The intimate relationship continues into the growth of the branches which can only exist when firmly attached to the vine, through which they receive their nourishment, in order to produce the fruit for which the vine exists.

Grower – vine – branches – fruit: a symbiotic and essential relationship, which Jesus expresses in more direct terms when he says, "abide in me as I abide in you." Remain firmly attached. That's the only way. Allow the free flow of the sap of the vine which is love.

Any bible passage (and every sermon) contains challenge as well as comfort. When I told Richard that I was preparing to speak about this reading, he was rather taken aback as, having studied in some detail how to nurture the vine growing up our back wall, he was quick to remind me that 'it's all about pruning!' And so it is. The Godly vine is no exception, as Jesus quickly makes clear. The fruitful branches will be pruned (cleansed) by the word of God to make them bear more fruit. Those branches that bear no fruit will be removed. Their relationship to the vine will be over.

Nothing can be taken for granted in God's garden. It's not for us to judge the fruitfulness of others but only to focus on the fruit given to us to bear.

A clue to the nature of the fruit of the vine is given in John's letter, when he writes that 'those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers and sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.' Every act of love increases our attachment to the vine which is Christ. Every act of hate or hurt or lack of care chips away at that attachment, loosening our relationship to him. Love is not just a feeling. It is a moral choice that God leaves each of us free to make.

'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.' As we emerge into a post-lockdown world and consider the sort of church we are called to be, this is a timely reminder that God is glorified, not by how or where or when or with whom we worship...only by the fact that we do; that God's glory lies not in how many buildings we maintain or how many church activities we support. The value of these lies only in how well they support us in mission. We give glory to God by fulfilling our essential purpose of bearing fruit as disciples of Christ. Remember, the vine bears no fruit in itself. The fruit appears only on the branches. If the fruit of God's love is to be known in the world, it has to be from us, acting in communion with Christ.

Jesus says to his disciples, "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." And he goes on to say, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Perhaps after all, it IS that simple.....All you need is love!