

## SERMON: 21.2.21

### FRUIT THAT WILL LAST: JOHN 15 & 16

It's beginning to get a bit lighter in the mornings now, though that may depend on what time you get up. If you're like me, you eventually put the light out in the bedroom and grope your way in the dark into the living room or kitchen. There's no point in complaining that it's dark, though. I could just switch the light on. The electricity is installed, as is the light-switch, but it's no good to me as long as I don't avail myself of it. It's available if I want to use it. This is an image we can understand, but it wouldn't have meant anything to a 1<sup>st</sup> century wine-maker, so Jesus used a picture they could understand – the one we have here of the vine, the branches and the fruit. In this chapter and the next he says 3 main things: we need to remain ATTACHED to him, we need to be FRUITFUL and we need COURAGE, because there will be opposition.

First of all then, **we need to remain attached**. In verse 4, he tells us: *Remain in me, and I will remain in you*. Indeed, the word *remain* is repeated 8 times in the first 8 verses. God the Father is the Gardener who planted the vine: Jesus. He, Jesus, tells us that we are the branches. Now, a vine without branches could not bear fruit and branches cut off from the stem would wither and die, certainly not bearing any new fruit either. This emphasizes the mutual dependence that we have. Jesus needs us to bear fruit for him in this world today, but we also need to remain close to him if we are to bear that fruit. There is however another element to this. For any plant to thrive, it needs to be able to draw nutrients from the earth, to carry them to every part of the plant through the sap. In our picture of the vine, this sap is the Holy Spirit, who gives life and so much more. That's why, in chapter 16, Jesus goes on to talk about how he will send the Holy Spirit to be present with his followers and to help them in their mission.

Our mission is to **bear fruit**. Bearing fruit is, as we have seen, a partnership. It doesn't just depend on me ... I can't do it without staying close to Jesus and without the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls him the advocate or counsellor, the one who comes alongside to help and to advise, to encourage and to strengthen. He is also the Spirit of truth, who teaches us, reminds us of what we have learnt.

In verses 9 – 16 Jesus reminds us of the prerequisite of fruitfulness. It all starts, he says, with love – the Father's love for him, his love for the Father and for his friends and our love for him, which is shown in obedience. This is mutual love, fellowship love, sacrificial love which enables us to serve and bear fruit for him. Notice too that we are not called to produce fruit but to bear fruit. In other words, the burden is on him, not on us. We just have to stay connected through faith, prayer, study of his Word and then through obedience. We do our bit, but the actual fruit is up to him.

That relieves us of some of the responsibility, at least for the outcome of our service. We share in his mission, as the 4<sup>th</sup> partner. That prevents us from the two extremes of pride, thinking that our own talents are sufficient, or of despair, believing that the task is too great or too difficult for us. We need the Holy Spirit to prompt us with the words to say. Even

Jesus said that he spoke only the words his Father gave him. We also need him to direct what we do just as Jesus allowed the Father to direct him.

Are you a leader or a follower? Many of us don't really like to lead, because that brings responsibility. We're much happier being led, letting someone else make the major decisions, though being allowed to make suggestions which may or may not be accepted.

Commenting on this idea of partnership, Phil Moore, in his commentary, says the following: *If you are tired of trying to share the Gospel without seeing much fruit; if you are daunted by the size of the mission which lies ahead; if you don't know how to begin, or what to say or what to do; if your calling is too great for you, then you are in the very place where Jesus wants you to be. Because it isn't your mission. It's the Father's mission. Then the Son's mission. Then the Spirit's mission. Then only fourthly yours. Let's remember that this mission is God's, not our own and we can do it together.*

How do we judge whether any fruit has lasted? Many of us can perhaps look back to someone we have brought to faith who has then lapsed. Or perhaps it is a child whom we have brought up in the church, but they have never embraced the faith for themselves ... and we can feel that we have failed. We haven't because we can be sure that something has rubbed off and the harvest is God's responsibility, not ours. Fruit that lasts may be a single life changed because of our Jesus-imitating love or it may be a single act or decision we have taken that has ultimately contributed to making the world a better place. We may never know, this side of heaven, what real fruit we have borne. Of course, there are other fruit too. We're not just talking of the fruit of evangelism, but there is answered prayer in verse 7, joy in verse 11 and love in verse 12. We also have the verses we know so well in Galatians 5 about the fruit of the Spirit and a further passage that bears study in 2 Peter 1: 5-8. All these make it clear that bearing fruit is possible for everybody – no excuses for age or infirmity!

My father would be ashamed of me because he loved his garden, but I have never had one and, quite honestly, have not really missed it. However, even I know that rose bushes need pruning if they are to produce lovely large blooms. We also had a vine on the side of the garage when I was a child. If I'm honest, the grapes never amounted to much, but I do remember that one of my jobs every year was to thin out the bunches. This was so that the grapes had room to swell. It's not just in the natural world, either, that some cleaning needs to be done. Some months back my battery-operated radio stopped working. I replaced the batteries but it still wouldn't make any noise. My brother, when consulted, cleaned the terminals and tried again ... success! The power could flow again. If we as Christians are not bearing fruit, maybe we need some of that pruning that Jesus talks about in verse 2. Our pride may not like it, but pruning does lead to more fruit. Is there anything in your life that is hindering the production of fruit? It may even be that sometimes a brother or sister who turns back and no longer benefits from the Spirit's life-giving power may need to be, as Jesus put it, cut off, not because we no longer love them but because, left alone, they may infect the rest of the vine.

Finally, if we are taking our part in God's mission, we mustn't expect to be popular, which is why the third word for this morning is COURAGE. Fellow Christians may appreciate us, but there will be opposition. This comes out particularly in verses 18-27 and again in chapter 16, verse 4. Jesus says that we won't be popular because we are citizens of heaven rather than this world, so friends and neighbours may treat us like foreigners. Sadly, we know that people who are different are often misunderstood, shunned and even mistreated. So Jesus says in verse 18: *if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of this world. That is why the world hates you.*

Take courage, though. Remember that Saul, the persecutor, became Paul the persecuted evangelist. That wasn't as a result of Ananias' work ... the change in Saul's heart had already occurred through meeting with Jesus and through the work of the Spirit. Ananias was rather like the midwife. The new birth was already taking place. He was just there to lend a helping hand.

At the end of chapter 16 Jesus gives us another reason for encouragement. Verse 33 says: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* The disciples may have wondered about that in the next few hours as they saw him go to the cross, but we have the benefit of hindsight and know that death could not hold him. It is highly unlikely in 21<sup>st</sup> century England that we are going to die for our faith ... though our brothers and sisters in other countries do face that possibility ... but even if that happens, we know as Christians that death is just a doorway to a new and better life.

To sum up, then, in these two chapters Jesus gives us three orders:

- Be close to me
- Be fruitful
- Be courageous

I'd like to close with a short prose poem for us to meditate on:

*You need the grapes to make the wine, the grapes that grow together on the same stem, drawing the same life-giving sap from the vine, tended by the same vine-dresser but growing together, touching, ripened by the same sun. together – in a bunch, shielding each other, supporting each other, yet each grape a complete unity, a whole fruit. These are the grapes that make the wine, the joy, the celebration – these grapes that grow together. (Ruth Burgess)*