

# Staying Connected

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## John 15: 1-8

This time last year we were at the height of the first wave of the pandemic and in total lockdown. The church was locked and even I, the Rector, wasn't permitted to enter the church on my own to record a service or pray. The government strapline, repeated at daily briefings, was '*Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives.*' So, we stayed at home. Gone were our weekly gatherings on a Sunday morning, either in the main service or as part of Junior Church; gone were our chats over coffee in the Church Hall. Gone were activities such as Little Saints, Messy Church, Fellowship Tea, our Lent study groups, Lent lunches and prayer meetings. Gone were meetings of the PCC and Action Groups. Gone was our contact with the residential care homes and pastoral visits to those in need. My first worry on hearing the news that churches had to close was '*How do we stay connected with one another? How do we ensure that no-one feels excluded or no longer part of the Church?*' A year on, we know that we suddenly found new ways to stay connected, mainly through using technology in new ways – YouTube for weekly recorded services, as well as Zoom which enabled us to see and hear one another in both services and meetings. The weekly Pastoral Letters kept us all up to date with Church news and a system of telephone contact was quickly put in place, crucial for those living on their own. We found new ways to be and to worship together, new ways to stay home with God, and new ways to stay connected with each other.

Our reading today from John's Gospel is all about connection – connection with Jesus as '*the true vine*' and the Father as '*the gardener*'. It's a great analogy that anyone who's ever had a garden to maintain will recognise. Each year, we face the task of cutting back branches, those that are dead and won't again produce fruit, and those that have borne *much* fruit, so that they will be even more fruitful the year after.

Since I've been your Rector, I've encouraged the PCC and the Action Groups formed to focus on 'faith and discipleship' and 'outreach and fellowship' to think about how what we do bears fruit, that is, what outcome does it have? And, if it has an outcome, is it the one we intended when we began the activity? And, if not, do we need to re-think what we're doing so that we have a better chance of achieving the outcome we'd hoped for? Some will say that there's no place for such 'management speak' in church and that a focus on

outcomes is best reserved for the boardroom, but in our passage today, Jesus tells us clearly that his Father, as the gardener, *knows* which branches aren't bearing fruit and, in knowing this, does something about it. He cuts off the branches that bear no fruit whatsoever. There's seemingly no second chance – they're gone, cut off, thrown into the fire and burned. But if we think the branches that bear fruit are left as they are, to flourish on their own, then we're mistaken, for the Father attends to these also. Every branch bearing fruit is pruned back – pruned of last year's growth, the dead leaves, even the signs of new growth. They're all cut back, so that next year it will be even more fruitful. The pruning of both the dead and the fruitful is necessary for something new to grow.

As a church approaching its Annual Parochial Church Meeting, where we both review the last year and start to make plans for the next, the theology of pruning is very timely. As everything we did at the start of 2020 came to an abrupt stop, it's given us a unique opportunity a year on to *think*. To think about what we did before. And whether what we did before was bearing fruit. Like many churches, we were a busy church. And there's always a danger that when our time is taken up with '*things to do*', even if they are really good things, that we restrict the time we have for God. It's a difficult balance. We can become like the people in the parable who were invited to the wedding feast of love but did not accept because they were too busy. When life is then cut or pruned in the way it has over for many of us over this last year, we may have feelings of emptiness and anguish, and we yearn for life to return to how it was before, but it can also prepare us for something new, just as the cutting back of a branch prepares it for new growth.

Jesus says very clearly that we are to remain in him, and he will remain in us. '*No branch can bear fruit by itself*', he warns, '*it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*' If Jesus is the vine, we are his branches. There is nothing therefore that we can do that will bear fruit if we are not connected to the vine, to Jesus. The passage ends with Jesus declaring that our remaining in the vine is to his Father's glory, particularly when we bear much fruit, as this shows ourselves to be his disciples. And if any of you have ever produced wine, you will know that it is the mature vines that produce the best grapes.

But what this passage also tells us is that our capacity to grow and be fruitful disciples of Christ is not reliant on our *own* strength but the strength that comes from being rooted in the true vine.

Over this last year, with so much church activity stripped away, we've had to find new ways to stay home with God. Many of you have found that you've had more time to engage with faith such as reading Scripture, committing to pray more, joining an online study group, and reading Christian books and articles. And the fruit of that has been a closer relationship with God and, for some, a greater desire to share that faith in what we say and do, particularly in supporting friends and neighbours who have needed help. Several of you have been involved in the Cottenham Covid-19 Support Team, a network of volunteer neighbours providing everyday support which helps a neighbourhood stay connected in trying times, like the 'flesh and blood' love of Christ sustaining his vine.

Over the next few months we will be asking ourselves as a church what we have learnt from the pruning we have experienced in lockdown. Rather than rushing back to doing everything we were doing before, we will be asking good but sometimes difficult questions about how fruitful those activities were. Questions such as - does what we're doing proclaim the kingdom? Does it communicate our faith, either implicitly or explicitly? Do our activities lead people to faith, or at least sow the seeds of faith? Are we responding to the needs of people through loving service, and have those needs changed over this last year? Is God therefore calling us to new areas of mission? And, are we working against injustice and looking after creation? Commonly known as the five marks of mission – if we can answer positively to some of these, we will be loving God and loving others, just as Jesus commanded us to do.

But there's a role for all of us in this process. Firstly, can I encourage you to think about your own journey of faith and to ask yourself, how has my own discipleship helped me to stay connected to God over this last year – to remain in the vine? And what can I carry on of that and share with others so that it might be of help to them? And, if you haven't felt particularly connected, what might you need to do to *re-connect*? If I can help with this, then please let me know.

Secondly, can you think about what are the changing needs of our communities, in Cottenham and in Rampton, and how you think we might, as a Church, begin to respond to those needs? This might be returning to an activity

we did before, either in the same way or run slightly differently, or it might be through starting something completely new. Or it could be continuing with something we've done because of the lockdown that we don't want to lose because it has been more fruitful than what we were doing before, such as the evening service by Zoom on a Sunday.

And thirdly, can you pray. Pray that, as a church, we're open to having these discussions. And that we're open to the possibility that through God's pruning of us, we will be even more fruitful than we were before. Fruitful in our own journeys of faith, but fruitful too in how we reach others with the Good News of Jesus and the new life that we are all promised by remaining in the vine, connected to the source of life that is Christ Jesus.

Amen.