

## EASTER 5B, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

### John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

What would Christianity look like if Christ's followers refused every other source of nourishment but Jesus? What would this community of faith look like if Jesus' voice and Jesus' words and his life were the only influences that shaped our lives? What would we each look like? My first thoughts, when I came across that first question in my reading this week, was that we'd probably look different; more in harmony. It's quite confronting to contemplate, too –there's a stark black and whiteness of choice – Jesus or nothing.

The answer emerging from the verses of today gospel would be straightforward, but with great depth –we'd look like a grape vine. All so entwined that we couldn't tell branch from branch or branch from vine, and all bearing fruit. Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches". "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower."

If you meander around vineyards, as I was doing earlier this week down the Peninsular, you'll notice how the branches of the vines are trained along rails of wire, all intertwined, shaped into a structure that assists growth and makes the grapes accessible to the picker. If you have your own home-grown grape vine, you mightn't have the same neat order, but there will still be a distinctive trunk and branches that thickly tangle and twine into each other. It's pretty near impossible to tell where each branch begins and ends. They're all bound up together, indistinguishable as individual branches, growing out of that central vine; dependent on the vine for life and vitality.

And so, the image is developed: branches of the vine don't stand out on their own in contrast to the others. Nor can they produce good fruit if they grow wild, or if their connection to the trunk is weakened. That central trunk of the vine is key; it's the source of nourishment and life, and even then, once all the growth is laterally intertwined, you can't pick out the central vine from the branches, apart from the vertical trunk that roots into the soil.

Even in a lifestyle two thousand years and city streets away from the agricultural setting of Jesus' time, the image still holds. Grapevines are still grapevines; and Jesus is that vine, we are the branches; God is the vine-grower, the gardener. Jesus is our source of nourishment.

This image of the vine is so well known that it can be easy to switch off. But getting this right is fundamental to who we are as Christ's people, so it's worth hearing it repeated. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit". The Gospel writer John goes on a lot about "abiding" –this sense of in-dwelling, inter-mingling and enmeshment of God and ourselves. Bearing fruit is what grape vines are for; bearing fruit is the natural outcome or consequence of being connected to Jesus Christ. Bearing good fruit or much fruit in the natural world comes from good gardening, and for us as church, and each of us who together intertwine to be church, God the Father prunes and shapes each part of the plant to enhance its fruitfulness. Bearing fruit is clearly significant –pivotal. This is where the energy and the focus of the vine-grower is directed. God the Father is attending to our growth of fruit as a key activity. Why? It's clearly not to make us all better individuals, as nice and good as that can be –the fruit being grown is not for our personal benefit or prosperity. This is not a passage that can be read to support any

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notions of a “prosperity gospel” – a gospel preached in many places which tells people that God wants to make us all rich, that blessings from God stream to us individually to enrich our lives and our pockets. Why drive a Ford if God really wants you in a Mercedes? Hear verse 8: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples”. This fruit bearing is for God's glory; not for us as individuals, for our own benefit.

The Gospel of John emphasises inter-relationship and an abiding, in-dwelling love that characterises and binds the community of Jesus’ followers. To bear fruit is to act in love; to love as Jesus has loved; it is a tangible sign of discipleship, of our identity as Christians, of our bearing the name of Christ. As one commentator puts it: “to live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organic unity shaped by the love of Jesus. The individual branch is subsumed into the communal work of bearing fruit, of living in love and so revealing itself to be one of Jesus’ disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

To circle back on the question I started with: what do we look like as this grapevine, as people whose lives are intertwined with each other and with Christ? For starters, all the notions of individuality and independence so nurtured and applauded in our modern society would disappear. Then, there’s no one branch that is more important than any other. Everyone works –abides - together in a kind of anonymity. There’s no centre stage, no hierarchy.

Even though the gospel writer was wanting to emphasise this in response to some issues that belonged to the life of that community in the late first century, this is something fundamental for every Christian community everywhere in all times and places to grasp. It’s about loving one another as Jesus has loved us –in the first place, within the community of fellow believers in Christ. Then, rooted and grounded in Christ, in that love, spreading out beyond the church to the world. It’s about producing that fruit of love which will point to the love of God, which will glorify him, and which will be clearly seen and recognised by others outside the community because it so contrasts with the ways of the world: the ways of individual self-gratification, self-focus, expectations of reward, recognition and status. That same fruit sustains life for others, and if we were to carry on through the whole image, the grape of the vine becomes the wine of the body of Christ shared in the common cup of the Eucharist. The fruit of the corporate body of Christ –us - joined with the very body and blood of Christ. Our lives given, spent for others in that fruit of love, just as Christ gave himself. Very deep theologically.

But let’s get back to what this means on the ground, for us here today. Clearly we can’t avoid the call to love –and this is not about *trying hard* to do good works, or trying hard to produce those fruit of the Spirit that the apostle Paul talks about (love, joy, gentleness, self-control etc) –we’re all prone to getting this back the front; but this is about love as a *consequence* - the movement of ourselves to connect closely to Christ, and from this connecting, this abiding, fruit is born. Love flows from Christ to us, and more we abide in him –the more we closely and consciously connect ourselves to him, the more that love will flow in us.

Today you will all receive a document in which is listed the many different aspects of life in this parish to which people variously contribute. It just so happened that the timing of this Stewardship Campaign fell on this Sunday with this text. We didn’t plan it that way. Yet, what is set before us in these words of Jesus’, couldn’t be more fitting. Today we each consider how we live as vine and branches, how our fruit is borne and given in and from this whole community of faith. The vine of Christ in this

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place –this parish, this wider community – is made up of all of us. The fruit of the vine is grown on the branches –in us, for God's glory. You can see the many different forms and guises of how God may use us when we offer ourselves, on the lists on those pages. Over the last few weeks we've offered special prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for everyone involved in these many different areas of parish life. Some of it is about building up and nurturing the body of Christ here, through our contributions to worship in every way, shape and form, including just faithfully being here; and through our care of each other, and through our assisting others to grow in life and faith –(like something that can seem unglamorous like minding littlies for mum's Bible studies). Some of it is about reaching out to the community, through the Peter James Centre, nursing homes or the local school, or welfare and justice activities. Some of it is about identifying special gifts you have that you may want to contribute, or things that you simply enjoying doing. Some of you may want to stretch your growth in Christ to something different. And dare I venture to say it, there's the financial giving as well –the sharing and giving from the financial fruits of our labour that contributes to that business of being able to maintain the work of the parish.

But running through all of this, whether you know you have gifts to share or think you don't have any, or have only a mite to give, there's that call to that self-giving, self-emptying love of Christ which is the fruit that glorifies God, and that God the gardener desires to shape and grow in you, the body of Christ.

Consider the vine of Christ in this place. How do you think we're looking?

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<sup>i</sup> NIB Volume IX Gospel of John, p760