

Easter 5 John 15:1-8

“No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me”

These words of Jesus make use of a well-established metaphor of the relationship of a vine and its branches. The vine is the constant, the life giving stem and root of the plant, the branches come and go, they can be pruned away or grafted on, and it is the branches which bear the fruit.

Think about that for a moment, quite clearly Jesus is talking about himself as the vine, he is saying that he is not the fruit bearer, but rather he is the enabler of others to bear fruit. Of course, like every metaphor, this one has its limit, Jesus certainly bore the fruits of the spirit in his life, he exemplified Godly living throughout his documented life and ministry. However, the greatest gift he has given the world is a new covenant, a relationship with God that enables Jesus' disciples to bear the fruit of branches fed by the ultimate vine.

The story Jesus tells here can seem quite intimidating, he talks of pruning the branches and throwing the dead wood into the fire, he warns that branches which bear no fruit will meet such a fate. It would be easy to imagine that we are being judged by God, the gardener in this metaphor, based on our fruit bearing skill, as though we are in a transactional relationship with God. We do good, God keeps us on the vine for a bit longer, we mess up and we are toast!

But such thoughts go against the very nature of grace. Everything we learn from St Paul, the apostles and even Jesus tells us that God loves us as we are, broken, messy, needy beings. By grace, not works we are saved, so how can it be that Jesus is warning us to do good things to court favour with God? Well, he's not saying that at all, and all it takes is some careful reading of the text to reassure ourselves.

Jesus says that the fruitless branches will be cut away but then he tells us what has caused them to be fruitless, they did not remain in relationship with the vine. “Remain in me and I will remain in you” Jesus said. We are not the cause of the fruitfulness or otherwise of our branches alone, our relationship with Jesus, the vine, is what determines how fruitful we are. We do nothing alone, apart from God, all that we achieve is because of the vine that feeds us.

By this measure, we are back in the realms of salvation by grace and not works, alleluia! We respond to the love of God and God's grace in our lives by accepting it as the free gift it is, by necessity we are transformed in God's love. We don't love to earn God's love, we are transformed by the love God already has for each of us, and our transformation sees us grafted onto the true vine of Christ. All that is left to do is to remain attached, the vine will ensure the branches bear fruit abundantly, the branches simply remain in the vine.

The bearing of fruit is not a measure of how hard we are working to be a disciple of Jesus but rather the fruit borne is an unavoidable side effect of live on the vine. By this logic, there are many people who bear the fruits of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control, and who are not followers of Jesus, does this mean they are part of the vine without even knowing or choosing this? It

is impossible to know for sure but Jesus was never in the business of creating an us and them club by any knowable earthly measure. Jesus was inclusive of all, Jews, gentiles, women and men, leaders and slaves. He told his disciples that they would be recognised in the world by the love they have for one another. God is love, not loving or loveable, but love. By this token everything which is based in love has something of God within it and about it.

That is the message St John had for us in his letter this morning. "God is love, everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God". Not every Christian who loves knows God, but everyone who loves knows God. This is truly the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ. We all know something of God each time we love another person or feel loved by them. We can all bear the fruit of a branch in God's vineyard by our loving interactions with God's children – other people.

We may not have incredible interactions with people searching for faith like St Peter did with the Ethiopian eunuch where we see the results of our witness. But, we are continually bearing Christ's fruit in our words and actions, and in so doing the fruit is seeding the people around us with words and examples that allow the gospel to take root in their lives. We may never know how or see the results of this, but we can be reassured that it happens all of the time. Not that we need take any credit for it, for us only one thing is necessary, to stay attached to the vine. Jesus said, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me"