

## Sermon for Sunday May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021 SJB and SSC

On his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday my late husband received a very interesting gift. An impressive certificate proclaimed him the owner, for one whole year, of a row of vines in a French vineyard, together with a generous amount of the fine white Burgundy wine they would produce. That sounded exciting! We could inspect the vines whenever we liked, be taken on vineyard tours and enjoy wine-tastings- -a good marketing ploy for the producers and a lot of fun for the recipients! I'd never been to a vineyard before and it was a revelation. So much work went into tending those vines, weeding, watering, feeding and pruning and the resulting bunches of grapes at harvest time were absolutely magnificent, as was the very carefully crafted wine.

Jesus the master teacher often hangs his teachings on striking stories and images that echo down the ages. Last week we looked at the image of himself as the good shepherd, giving his life to save the sheep and bringing other sheep into his all-inclusive fold.

This week it 's the vine. In the Holyland vines grow not only in commercial vineyards but wherever shade is needed, outside restaurants, in gardens, all over the place, so like shepherds and sheep they were a part of the every day lives of his first hearers. These would be familiar with references to the vine in their scriptures as well. In the Old Testament it's an often used image for the people of Israel, so when Jesus says, "I am the true vine" he's taking the image used by the prophets and giving it a whole new meaning.

I should love to invite you to do a brainstorm where you simply throw out any random ideas and questions that this intriguing image brings to your minds. I'm certain it would prove fascinating and illuminating, but as we don't have the time here, I simply offer you a few thoughts to get you started and invite you to go on mulling it over in the days to come, especially in your prayers, asking how it might apply to you personally in your life right now.

"I am the vine", Jesus says to his disciples, as they sit at together at supper on the awesome night before he is to die. "I am the vine, you are the branches".

The branches totally depend on the vine. They all have equal access to the nourishment that flows into them from the fertile soil through the roots and stem of the vine itself. No branch is superior or more valuable. No branch is perfect either. All need to be regularly pruned, or cleansed as the word used here really

means, by the vine-grower, God. Their god given purpose is to bear fruit, fruit that when it is pressed will give its very being to be transformed into the wine that gives joy and gladness to others. The branches can't produce the fruit by their own efforts. Only if they're securely grafted into the vine can they bear fruit. If they're only lodged in somehow amongst the other branches they will be fruitless and eventually wither and fall away.

Writing about the fruit of the spirit in his letter to the church in Galatia St Paul says this..”The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control”. Nothing here about being clever then. Nothing about power or status or hierarchy. This fruit can grow in the life of anyone at all, regardless of intellect or status, race or gender or anything else. Just one thing is crucial- -abiding in Christ. But what does that mean?

The original Greek word translated into English as “abide” means something around “indwelling, being deeply at home, connected, in communion”. St John uses “Abide” so often it almost becomes a mantra. It occurs eight times just in this short extract we’ve read today. It’s really about a deep and intimate relationship. If we’re abiding in Christ, allowing his love to permeate our lives, then the fruit of the spirit can grow in us and make a difference. Our community can be built on mutual love and respect so that the love of Christ is reflected outwards in all our words and actions. We will be totally inclusive and non judgemental, everyone will be valued and the fruit of the spirit will continue growing and developing. What a glorious vision! But it will always be a work in progress. Regular pruning, cleansing will always be necessary.

Pruning always means change. The vinegrower in France explained to us about the need to cut off the non fruiting side shoots to allow all the nourishment to go into the main shoot in order to give it the very best chance to produce good fruit. We don’t always like change do we? But lockdown has presented us with a unique opportunity to take stock and really consider our future priorities. What do we need to take up again that really furthers our main purpose? What can we leave aside? How can we more consciously and deliberately seek to abide in Christ?

Christ himself has left us in no doubt. He has given us the basics for our journey of faith: baptism, god’s word in the Bible , Holy Communion and prayer, all within a united community committed to loving and forgiving one another and

sharing the good news of God's love for all of creation. It sounds clear and simple enough doesn't it? It's not rocket science! But oh dear, the world is so complicated! We mess up so often. There are so many things that seem to get in the way.

St Paul himself knows all about abiding in Christ. He writes about it endlessly, but he writes about how he struggles with it too. That gives us all hope!

There's an amazing promise at the end of our reading: . "ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

I've always struggled with this and I still do. When I pray I know the answer is not always the one I want. There are always three possible answers: "Yes", "no" and "not yet", but the promise is conditional on what comes first: "**If** you abide in me and my words abide in you". **If** we really were totally at one with Christ and with all his teachings in every fibre of our beings, body, mind and spirit, then our wishes would be totally aligned with his will. As it is we are a work in progress and we simply ask for what is on our hearts and accept that the answer may be "yes", "no" or "not yet".

Jesus' invitation is to pray in the spirit of abiding and to do so with full awareness of the surrounding environment of his word of life to all people. I guess that I at least won't reach that final stage in this life but I do know for sure that we can trust Jesus to be with us always, whether we can feel him or not. I do know that he, Jesus, the human face of God himself, died and rose again for the whole creation out of love. Amazingly he wants to draw us all into the intimate and dynamic relationship of father, son and holy spirit so that all become one as they are one.

We can't make this happen by our own efforts. The grapes don't grow by working at it furiously but by drawing nourishment from the vine and submitting to pruning. Sometimes even smaller bunches of grapes just forming get removed by the grower to give the best ones more sunlight and fresh air. I wonder where we might need to let more sunlight and fresh air into our relationship with God and let go of some of the things that crowd him out. It will be different for every one of us. It can be very helpful to talk about these things with someone you trust. Mike and I are always ready and willing. None of us has all the answers but sharing the struggles of others can often help with your own.

Above all, be encouraged in your life of faith. Never forget that you are unique and precious and infinitely loved and forgiven. Today starts a new week. It's spring, we're in Eastertide and alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!.