

The Parable of the Vine

John 15

31 July 2011

When we first arrived in the parish of Murrumburrah Harden, we found a huge old grape vine growing over the western side of the rectory. That's the *new* rectory, built in 1957. It replaced the *old* rectory built in 1876 and still lived in but not by the rector! And in case you think they were the good old days when everyone went to church, listen to this entry in the parish service register for Sunday 11 August 1907: "No collection made today" and the reason was "no Wardens or Parish Councillors present to take the plate around. This applies to both morning and evening services", the book notes. How these Wardens and Parish Councillors of St Paul's Murrumburrah expected the poor Rector to feed his horse and get around the parish I don't know.

But back to the grape vine on the new rectory. It was obvious this grape vine had not been pruned for donkey's years. Behind the green leaves was a tangled mass of dead wood and dead leaves. So I borrowed a parishioner's ladder and got stuck into it with pruning saw and secateurs. Eventually there was a heap of dead branches and leaves ready for burning. And then I noticed an interesting thing. I had pruned the vine back to its main trunk, new green leaves and branches and all. But once cut off from the trunk, these green leaves began to curl up and die within minutes. During summer, these leaves could withstand the western sun all afternoon without wilting at all. They provided protective shade to that side of the house. But as I said, once cut off from the trunk of the vine, these branches withered and died within minutes. Why? Because they obviously had no life in themselves. Their life came from the trunk of the vine, but when cut off they just died.

And then the thought struck me: that's how our Lord Jesus Christ explained the way Christians need to stick to him in order to stay alive and produce 'fruit'. And that's because Christians have no life in themselves, only in Jesus. It's called the 'Allegory of the Vine' and it is found in our gospel reading for today from John 15:1 and following.

John 15 is part of that long section called The Farewell Discourse and Prayer and consists of chapters 13 to 17. The setting is the upper room in Jerusalem during Passover, on the very night the Lord Jesus is betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In John 15: 1 Jesus says, "I am the *true* vine and my Father is the gardener". This is the last of our Lord's 'I am' sayings. You remember there are seven of them: I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the bread of life; I am the good shepherd and so on. 'I am', you remember, was God's name revealed to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3, so when Jesus says "I am" something, he is unambiguously and blatantly taking God's name for himself. There can be no doubt about who Jesus thinks he is in these sayings. The question is, who do we think he is? Another 'I am' saying, not included in the seven, and mostly missed, is in John 6. The disciples are sailing back across the lake to Capernaum after the feeding of the five thousand. A storm blows up but Jesus comes to the rescue, 'walking on the water', John says. The disciples are terrified of this apparition, but Jesus calls out "it is I. Don't be afraid" (John 6: 20). But the Greek text says, "I am. Don't be afraid". Awesome!

But back to our reading. "I am the true vine", Jesus says. What does he mean here by 'the true vine'? The real vine, the genuine vine. He is contrasting himself with the people of Israel because

they are frequently described as God's vine, or God's vineyard in the Old Testament. "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel", says Isaiah in 5:7. "I had planted you a noble vine", says Jeremiah in chapter 2. "Your mother was like a vine", says Ezekiel in 19:10. "You brought a vine out of Egypt", says the psalmist in Psalm 80:8, referring to God's deliverance in the exodus. So important was this grape vine imagery to the people of Israel that they used it as their national emblem on their coins.

Remember the Jewish War of Independence against the Greek Empire in the second century BC. Read all about it in the books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. An independent people want their own coins with their own national symbols on these coins. And for the Jewish people of the second century BC, that emblem or symbol was the grape vine. When King Herod the Great built his magnificent temple in Jerusalem, he decorated the door of the temple with a grape vine. But this was no ordinary grape vine. King Herod didn't want anything ordinary in his temple, so King Herod made his grape vine of solid gold, and rich people thought it an honour to donate a solid gold grape or a bunch of grapes to this grape vine. Surely the ultimate national symbol to the glory of Israel – and of course King Herod. If he was king of Australia, I can imagine King Herod building a Big Merino as our symbol, only with a fleece of gold rather than concrete!

But there is a dark side to the grape vine as the symbol of Israel. In every case where Israel is described as God's vine, or God's vineyard in the Old Testament, she is described in a negative way. "God looked for grapes and it only brought forth wild grapes", says Isaiah in 5:2. "I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock", complains God. "How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?" Jeremiah 2:21. "Israel is a useless vine, fit only for burning", says Ezekiel in chapter 15.

Incidentally, the wood of the grape vine is useless for making things. It is not even good for firewood. That is why those on the firewood roster for the temple in Jerusalem could bring any wood – except grape vine wood for the altar fire. If it didn't produce grapes, the grape vine was totally useless. In the light of all this, the Lord Jesus announces that the people of Israel are not the true vine at all – he is the true, genuine vine. And that means the Lord Jesus is the true Israel. "I am the true Israel", he means.

The people of God are now reduced to a class of one, Jesus the last man standing, the one and only true Israel, the one and only true vine of God. Is this the end of God's vineyard? The end of his people? No. Jesus is going to create a new 'true blue' Israel. And he will do this by calling people to follow him and be joined to him like branches on the true vine.

How do you get to be a branch of Jesus the true vine? How do you get to belong to the 'true blue' Israel or people of God? John uses several metaphors to describe this basic truth. He talks about *believing* in Jesus, that is *trusting* in Jesus, *coming* to Jesus and *following* Jesus. There is only one way of becoming a branch of God's true vine, though John uses these various terms to describe it: it is a faith relationship with Jesus the true vine, faith expressed in words to him.

This faith relationship with Jesus expressed in words is absolutely amazing when you think about it. Back in John 14:20, the Lord Jesus has explained this relationship in terms of "you are in me and I am in you". While in 14:10 and 11 the Lord Jesus says "I am in the Father and the Father is in me". That's what he means by this allegory of the grape vine. It is called 'Mutual Indwelling'. Jesus'

followers are *in* him and he is *in* the Father, meanwhile the Father and Jesus are *in* Jesus' followers along with the Holy Spirit as Jesus will go on to reveal in chapter 16. So although the persons of the Holy Trinity are in a state of 'mutual indwelling', they remain distinct as persons, just as you I remain distinct persons although Jesus says we are in him and he is in us. Mysterious? Yes. Hard to understand? Of course. But that's what Jesus says so don't argue, just believe it and get on with life.

And if you are part of the true grape vine, getting on with life involves pruning and bearing fruit. But if Jesus is the vine, then who does the pruning? It is God the Father, Jesus says in verse 1, God the gardener. The Greek word here actually means a farmer, though in English we usually have other terms like 'grape grower' or 'viticulturalist' or 'wine maker'. Anyway, whatever you call the job, it is God the Father's job to grow the vine and prune the vine, Jesus says, so that it will be even more fruitful. That is the purpose of the vine, to produce fruit.

As I said, the wood of the grape vine is useless, even as firewood. The grape vine is useful only for growing grapes. No farmer or grape grower wants vines that do not produce grapes, and neither does Farmer God. But if this grape vine story is an allegory, what does the fruit stand for? The fact is, the Lord Jesus doesn't say *what* the fruit stands for. But we can put two and two together, or connect the dots, and come up with a good suggestion.

From what John has already told us, two words jump out: 1. Faith. 2. Christian character. That's because like fruit, faith and Christian character take time to grow and mature, and like fruit, must be cultivated by us and by Farmer God who does the pruning. Again, what the pruning stands for in the allegory is not defined, but maybe there is a clue in Hebrews 12:4-11. There the writer says Father God disciplines his children and he admits that "no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful". Think pruning saws and secateurs! Later on however, this discipline produces a harvest, the writer says. And what is the harvest? It is 'righteousness and peace', the writer says in verse 11. Back in verse 10, he says God "disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness". So there are the dots connected. That is the fruit Farmer God is looking for in us branches of Jesus the true vine: righteousness, holiness and peace with God. And peace, Hebrew 'shalom', means all the blessings of God to the people of God in the Kingdom of God. That's what God's pruning achieves, and that's the fruit he is looking for.

But what about the branches that bear no fruit and are cut off, as Jesus says? Remember what the fruit is: it is faith in Jesus and maturing Christian character of righteousness, holiness and peace. How can one be a branch of the true vine and not produce some of this fruit? It is impossible. As Don Carson says in his commentary on John, "there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. The alternative is dead wood". That is, not a living branch of the vine at all. Yet Jesus calls them branches "in me", verse 2. What sort of branches or people could these be? Again, Don Carson has a helpful suggestion: "if we must think of branches with real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot." Judas looked like a branch of the true vine as a disciple of Jesus. He was one of us, they would say. But look how he ended up: he showed no fruit of faith or righteousness or peace whatsoever. John tells us that he did what Satan, his real boss, told him to do and in the end was possessed by Satan personally. Instead of being mutually indwelt by Jesus, he was indwelt by Satan, John says.

It is interesting to know that the Greek word for 'prunes' in verse 2 also means to 'clean'. That explains what Jesus says in the next verse. Having said Farmer God prunes fruitful branches to make them more fruitful, he says "you are already *clean*". The same Greek word. How have they been *cleaned*? "You are already *clean*", says Jesus "because of the word I have spoken to you" in verse 3. That is, receiving the teaching of Jesus is another way Farmer God prunes the followers of Jesus to make them more fruitful.

As Leon Morris says in his commentary, "when Jesus says *cleans* instead of *prunes* it shows we have moved away from the vine metaphor to the personal spiritual level. Jesus is not talking about what happens to the *vine* now. He is talking about what happens to the *person* who believes and obeys his word. That person is pruned / cleaned by receiving the teaching or word of Jesus. But to be able to receive the teaching of Jesus, the disciple must *remain* in Jesus so that Jesus can *remain* in the disciple. That is, the mutual indwelling mystery.

'Remain' or 'abide' is a very important word which the Lord Jesus uses several times here for emphasis. As long as we deliberately remain or abide in Jesus and he in us we *will* bear the fruit Farmer God is looking for. So don't worry about being cut off from the vine as a fruitless branch. The fruit will grow naturally, not by our effort or cleverness. The fruit will grow by the life of Jesus within us as we remain or abide in him and he in us, he promises.

I got rid of all the dead stuff I had pruned off our grape vine by incinerating it. You could do that in a country town in those days, and it's all you can do with dead grape vine wood. But every year after that, I made sure I gave that grape vine a thorough pruning to keep it in good shape and productive.

Let's receive the pruning Farmer God gives us. 1. as we submit to his discipline and 2. as we obey the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Then we will naturally produce the fruit he is looking for and that fruit is faith and Christian character.

Israel, as God's grape vine in the Old Testament, was a bitter disappointment to God. "What more could I have done for my vineyard?", complains God. "When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" (Isaiah 5:4).

May our fruitfulness in Jesus, the true vine, make up for God's disappointment. He will be so pleased if we do.