

Sermon – Easter 5, 2nd May 2021 St Johns & Podcast

John 15:1-8 'I am the vine; My Father is the vine grower' v1.



Last week we had the image of a shepherd, laying down across the entrance of a sheep-fold to protect his flock, and we reflected on how Christ laid down his life for us as the Good Shepherd when he died for us on the cross. In today's Gospel reading, we have the equally meaningful picture of a vine. Like the shepherds from last week, vineyards were a common sight in the villages of first century Palestine. So when Jesus says things like '*I am the vine, you are the branches*' and '*my father is the vine grower*', and he exhorts his hearers to '*abide*' or '*remain*' in him' so that they can '*bear much fruit*' (v2), clearly his words had resonance to his hearers. What modern illustration might we use to help gain insight into some of the points Jesus was making? If you have a mobile phone I'd like you to hold it up. Probably also a good time to check it's on silent! A vine leaf has to be connected to a branch if it is to flourish. Similarly, a mobile phone has to be connected to a network in order for it to function -we all know what it's like when we're waiting for an important call but just can't get any signal. A vine also needs to have its roots in good soil, and a

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mobile phone needs to be frequently rooted to its charger, to keep it powered up. So when Jesus is saying '*I am the true vine, abide in me*' his hearers, like us today, are being asked the question what is keeping us rooted and how are we connected?

Let's look briefly at that first point – how are we being rooted? Commentators and psychologists point to a cultural shift from the 1940s-50s war spirit of 'we're all in it together' to the 1960s emphasis on 'individual freedom'. Nowadays we see the continuation of individualism through the rise of what the Professor of Psychology at San Diego Uni described as the 'i-generation' or 'selfie-generation' -the primary focus is on oneself, one's own happiness and gratification. But I find it fascinating and saddening that despite such emphasis on our personal freedom, high suicide rates persist, depression and anxiety remain real issues and people still long for meaning. It's like we're out alone on the hillside but with the wrong map and without a compass - free to select our path, but without a sense of direction. So when Jesus says '*I am the true vine*', he is saying to his hearers, abide in me, put your roots in me if you want to a real sense of hope and peace, and a life with direction and meaning. John Locke wrote, '*no man is an island*' - we are not created by God to be individuals but to find our identity and meaning in him. Think back to that image of the mobile phone – it needs to be rooted, needs to have something to power it up in order to be what it's designed to be. As St Augustine of Hippo once wrote '*Lord you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.*' To flourish

like we were meant to, we need to root our hope and trust in Jesus Christ. Only in him will we find our meaning and purpose.

The Old Testament image of the vineyard was one which was associated with land and territory, where lots of individual vines represented the people of Israel, as Isaiah 5:7 says

'The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.'

The New Testament picture of the vine supersedes that old testament illustration by saying there is now only one vine, and that vine is Jesus Christ, we have our roots in him and the meaning and purpose we find in following him and his commands. Second point follows from this and is about being connected. We are the branches and Jesus is the vine through which all branches connect. *'Abiding'* in the true vine means we begin to see our place in the world, our location in a story that began with the creation of the universe and continues to today. If a branch is removed it can't thrive on its own, it needs to be part of something. Part of our God given identity is as human beings who are meant to live in community, not as isolated individuals. Think of the mobile – it needs to reach a network to connect with others and function fully. Sure, you can use it off line, but offline it will never achieve its full intended potential. God has placed a natural obligation on us, a healthy limitation on our personal freedom, to be concerned about the welfare of others. Author and commentator David Brooks of the NYT writes that *'freedom is not the absence of restraint, but the*

freedom to choose to commit to something'. He gives illustration of piano – free to choose to play piano but it requires commitment and persistence to make that freedom have meaning. He draws on Biblical influence to suggest true freedom and meaning are found not in individualism but in freely making promises of commitment in four main areas 1 – our spouse and family 2- our vocation 3 our faith and 4 our community. Abiding in Christ the true vine means we recognise we are made in the image of God, and that we find meaning through being promise-making individuals, individuals not designed or destined to exist in isolated bubbles of personal fulfilment but through being knit together in family and in community that is rooted in the Christian faith. We are meant to be covenant makers, promise makers, because we are made in the image of a promise-making, a covenant-making God. His promise is to never leave us or forsake us. This same loving God invites us to abide in him. Amen.



[Finish with notice about 'THY KINGDOM COME' 13-23 MAY]