

## Sermon for 24.02.07

### Jesus said: "I am the vine"



- Those who remain in Jesus will bear fruit
  - If you have even a little fruit, you are in Jesus ("without me you can do nothing")
  - Those who are in him, he prunes – to make them more fruitful. He cuts out disease or anything that should not be there, anything that is harming the growth of the branch. Anything stopping it bearing fruit.
  - Cuts off those branches that are dead – that have no relationship with him at all. He exposes those who have no relationship with him. If we are in Christ then there should be a relationship and that should bring fruit
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- Fruit = Witness to others, bringing others to faith – or – becoming more Christ-like.
  - "By their fruit you will recognise them" ( Matt 7:20)

This is the last of the "I am" sayings of Jesus. Once again, Jesus uses very pictorial language that would have been very familiar images to his listeners. The listeners were of course, the disciples. We are now very close to the time of Jesus death.

Jesus starts of by saying "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener". The 'true' vine is probably a comparison with the nation of Israel. Israel was the chosen people of God who were supposed to 'bear fruit' – carry out God's work, live lives of devotion to him, uphold justice. But they had only produced bad fruit

Isaiah 5:1-2 says:

- <sup>1</sup> I will sing for the one I love  
a song about his vineyard:  
My loved one had a vineyard  
on a fertile hillside.
- <sup>2</sup> He dug it up and cleared it of stones  
and planted it with the choicest vines.  
He built a watchtower in it

and cut out a winepress as well.  
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,  
but it yielded only bad fruit.

And verse 7:

<sup>7</sup>The vineyard of the LORD Almighty  
is the house of Israel,  
and the men of Judah  
are the garden of his delight.  
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;  
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Israel had failed to produce the fruit that God was looking for but Jesus refers to himself as the 'true' vine through who the good fruit that God desires is produced.

The fruit plays a key part in this passage so we should try to understand first of all what the fruit is. There are two trains of thought for this. Many people think of it as new Christians. In other words that the fruit God is looking for us to produce means that we need to evangelise, go and make disciples.

Well, let's go with that for a minute. If this is the kind of fruit we need to bear then it means that we have to take some action doesn't it? We have to go and tell others about our faith. We have to tell our friends, our colleagues, our family about the things of God. We have to witness to others.

The second theory is that the fruit is more of a personal fruit in the life of the Christian themselves. Not to do with how many converts they manage to score, but more to do with their relationship with God. This second theory is the one that I think I would go with although it is inevitable that as we produce this kind of fruit, that will cause us to witness to others and it is likely that new people will make a commitment to follow Jesus as a result.

The problem I have with the first theory is that it would mean that whether someone becomes a Christian or not depends on how well you do your job of evangelising. Of course, it does make a difference which is why some are called to be evangelists and others are not. As we know,

some are better evangelists than others but it is not the evangelist that does the converting, it is the Holy Spirit that prompts a person to see the truth in the evangelists words and the person themselves that decides whether or not to take action. Millions were converted after hearing Billy Graham, which could be classed as a branch bearing much fruit. But not everyone who heard him was converted. I don't think that Billy Graham's crusades are so successful because he is a good speaker. Of course, this makes a difference but I think because he has a close relationship with God, God can work powerfully through him.

We should not judge ourselves by the amount of converts we get, or the amount of Bible verses we can quote. We should instead examine the inner fruit. What are we like on the inside? Are we anything like Jesus? Can we see bits of Jesus in our lives?

When a gardener tends to a bush, they only really need one tool, a knife or something similar to cut with. There are two types of cutting needed and both are mentioned in the passage. First of all the gardener needs to cut out the dead branches or branches that carry disease. There is a hard lesson here for us. There are some people who would happily put themselves down on a survey as being Christian. They may even come to church. But they have no interest in God at all. They have no interest in keeping his commands or in doing what pleases God. I'm not talking about spiritual struggles here, I'll come to that in a minute. I'm talking about a complete lack of relationship with God.

Also a gardener tending a bush needs to cut out rotten branches. Branches carrying disease. If the disease cannot be removed from the branch then the branch needs to be cut off or the disease can spread to other branches and affect the whole bush.

The second activity that the knife is used for is for pruning. This may look a little like the first but it is very different. Pruning is a vital activity for every branch that *does* bear fruit. The word pruning can also be thought of in terms of cleaning or purifying. It is the same principle.

In these circumstances, this is a good branch that is capable of bearing good fruit. For us this means that we who bear fruit, we who are Christians can expect to be pruned. It doesn't sound very pleasant to be honest does it? Some say that the pruning is the difficulties that Christians go through in life. This makes them stronger Christians if they can get through it. Another way to think about this though, is God removing the bad bits from us. We who are connected to the vine and produce good fruit, albeit small, we are good branches and God wants us to bear more fruit. That is the reason given for the pruning. This is for our benefit. It is to make us the people who God wants us to be. In practical terms, this means that we who are seeking to live devoted lives to God, can expect God to challenge us on areas of our lives that need some pruning. Things in our lives that need to be cut out. We need to be listening to God and we need to be open to him. It can be a bit uncomfortable when we examine ourselves in the light of the Holy Spirit. But we should bear in mind that only good branches are pruned, bad branches are cut off altogether. God's desire is for us to bear more fruit, to be more like Christ. If we want to reach our full potential, then we need to let the Holy Spirit work in our lives.

You may be wondering if you are a good branch or a bad branch. [Luke 6:43](#) says:

["No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."](#)

If you are producing good fruit in your life, then take some encouragement from this verse. You are a good tree or a good branch. Guilt is something that many Christians suffer from. When we listen to God he points things out to us. When we allow the light of the Holy Spirit into our lives it exposes things in us and that can make us feel ashamed or guilty. But if we can see this as part of the pruning process then we will be on the way to becoming the kind of people God wants us to be. When God points these things out to

us, it is so as we can act on them in order to become better people.

But maybe you feel that you are still not sure. Perhaps you don't believe you are producing bad fruit, so you wouldn't call yourself a bad branch but you don't seem to be producing much good fruit either.

Well, the reason for that is also explained in verse 4 of John 15. "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

It's obvious isn't it? We see this happen with a vase of flowers don't we. A flower in a field can last a while but as soon as you cut it away from the root it becomes vulnerable. Even in water it can't survive long but if it was simply left, it would be dead within a day or so. So it is with us. If we don't stay connected to Jesus, we become dry Christians. Our Christian life will soon dry up and we will stop producing fruit. That is why Jesus says "without me you can do nothing".

So we need to devote ourselves as much as we possibly can to God. We need to make sure that there are no blockages that are stopping us from growing. Ruth and I had a bush at the front of our house in Solihull. It had wonderful red flowers on it and I looked after it well and it grew well. But then I neglected it and the next year I noticed that there were hardly any flowers growing on it. To be honest I thought it was dead but it was a mess anyway so I cut it right back. I cut off all the dead branches. As I was doing this though, I noticed that some of the branches still seemed strong. After this the plant grew again and it was at least twice the size that it had been before.

The moral of the story is that God the Father is described here as the gardener. If I can manage to resurrect a dying bush then how much more can God make a difference in your life? I wouldn't be here if I didn't think that was possible.

If your relationship with God has dried up a bit then perhaps God is prompting you tonight to put things right. You can

only start from where you are. If you currently don't pray then why not try praying for a few minutes either when you get up or when you go to bed or at some point during the day. And if you don't read your Bible then again just read a short passage. What I'm trying to say is that if you spend five minutes in prayer, it's five minutes more than you pray now so that is good progress.

And finally, if you are producing good fruit in your life then let's be open to God's pruning. Jesus died in order that the bad bits in us can be removed. Jesus made it possible for us to be pruned rather than thrown away altogether. It is not always comfortable, but through it we can be confident of producing even better fruit.

The key to all of this though is our relationship with God. It is only by staying connected to the vine, having a relationship with God, that we can produce good fruit. It is only through him that we can become the people that God wants us to be.