

I am the True Vine

John 15 vv 1-8

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"I am the true vine" - this is the last of the seven descriptions of himself which Jesus gives to his disciples. In each case the Greek is the solemnly emphatic form of "I AM" is used; the format which was to cause the High Priest to tear his clothes and send Jesus to Pilate for execution for blasphemy as this title was reserved for God.

One of the best-known passages from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah is where the prophet describes the people of Israel and Judah as being God's vineyard, a vineyard planted by Yahweh in ground specially prepared, his good creation, protected by a hedge, and watched over; and then called upon to produce good fruit - justice and righteousness.

Jesus takes the imagery a step further. The Father has now planted the vineyard with one perfect Vine, a vine which is always perfectly attuned to the will of the Father.

In Isaiah's vineyard the vines produced sour, wild grapes; but now in St John's gospel, Jesus himself is the vine and the branches of the vine now produce good fruit.

I suspect that most of us are not familiar with the technicalities of growing grapes and pruning vines; I struggle to prune my climbing roses properly never mind a grape vine. Modern gardening is mostly about creating a pleasant environment in which to relax -possibly with a glass of wine! - but a vineyard in biblical times was very different - more akin to managing an allotment or a market garden.

Growing grapes was an essential part of life, not a luxury. Wine was safer to drink than water and the transformation of the fairly bland grape juice into wine was seen by primitive people as a small but reliable miracle.

Crucial to all this was the care and careful pruning of the vines, a socially important skill. Plants were pruned to stimulate growth and useless bits pruned out. In the Greek of this passage there is quite a lot of word play and punning between the different Greek words for pruning out, pruning for growth and cleansing. Even in this solemn setting of the first Maundy Thursday Jesus was using humour to teach his disciples.

Wine was a symbol of the richness and the wonder of God's creation, a symbol of his overflowing generosity. The intoxicating effect of the wine was a part of its mystery and comparable to the intoxicating effects produced when the Holy Spirit was poured out on a prophet.

Wine was something to be shared, especially at social gatherings and festivals such as Passover. You will remember that at our Seder meal several cups of wine are drunk - and think how much wine Jesus produced at the Wedding in Cana of Galilee! Jesus also of course used wine in the institution of the holy sacrament of the Eucharist.

Jesus, with his imagery of himself as the vine and us as the branches, was describing a new type of community, his church. Here we are invited to co-operate with God in the inauguration of his Kingdom. Here as branches it is our responsibility to produce fruit - without the branches on the vine there is no fruit; without the Church the wine of the Kingdom will not be produced. These are the branches pruned for growth.

The word "community" tends to be used to describe loose associations of people, often with no real connection with each other. People can join and leave a community rather like joining and leaving a social club or gardening association.

Membership of the Church, the body of Christ in the world is a much tighter bond. In baptism we are, as the Catechism says, made a member of Christ; we are joined to his life as surely as the branch of a vine is joined to the trunk. We cannot fulfil our God-given potential without him. The branch cannot survive without the trunk. But united with Christ, the life-giving vine, we are enabled to bear good fruit. We are nourished by his life, fed by him, and in the Mass incorporated with him.

Bearing good fruit is not necessarily the same as being successful. Jesus is not talking about financial prosperity, or number of converts obtained, but the fruit of lives being attuned to God, the fruit that God looked for in Isaiah's vineyard.

In his letter to the Galatians St Paul describes this fruit as "love, joy, peace, patience and kindness." The fruit is both a personal growth into the person that God is calling us to be, and a societal coming of the Kingdom of God.

But there is another truth in this passage: we are branches of the vine who is Christ. The branches are the same substance, the same tissues as the vine. Christ is fully human, one of us. God through Christ has united himself to humanity in an indissoluble link; he is truly our brother.

So come to Christ, the Way the Truth and the Life, be united with him in his resurrection life, partake of the banquet he provides for his people - for he invites all to join with him, all to be grafted onto the one true Vine.