

Sermon – 23/04/2006 am

The True Vine

Study Text: John 15:1-8

I recently bought a passionfruit vine and planted it in my backyard. It looked so vigorous in the pot and the tag tied to it had a picture of a large purple passionfruit. But since planting it, it has not grown at all. I water and fertilise it, it produces a few shoots but then these just wither and die. It is a grafted vine and wild shoots keep coming out from below the graft. It seems the graft is not good. I fear the only passionfruit I am going to see on this vine is the one pictured on the tag!

Jesus spoke to his disciples about bearing fruit in their lives – much fruit, real fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that will bring glory to God. To do this he said they must remain in the vine. The vine is Christ and apart from him ‘you can do nothing’. He warned them about branches that bear no fruit. Such branches may look to be in the vine but are not truly abiding in Christ. The only fruit they bear is like the picture on the tag – of no use to anyone. They will be taken out and destroyed.

The Vine Metaphor

We come in this passage to the last of the ‘I am’ statements of Jesus in this gospel. *I am the true vine*. To this statement Jesus added the words *and my Father is the vinedresser* (15:1). What is the background to this metaphor and what is the context in which Jesus makes this declaration? He is still speaking to the eleven disciples. He tells them they *are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you* (15:3). He previously told them *you are clean but not all of you* (13:10). Judas was with them in the upper room at that time.

They are still in the upper room as we come to this chapter – though some scholars think they have already left. Chapter 14 closed with Jesus saying *arise let us go from here*. But chapter 18 begins with *when Jesus had spoken these words he went out with his disciples to the garden*. There are two perfectly logical explanations for this ‘double exit’ as it were.

Firstly, it is possible that the chapters are not in chronological sequence. The gospel writer may well be going back to give further detail of what Jesus spoke on this his last hour with them. Secondly, it is not at all uncommon to get up to leave a meeting with friends, only to continue talking for quite a time before actually leaving.

The vine metaphor, some suggest, arose because here in the upper room Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper. Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine as symbols by which they were to remember him. Earlier Jesus told them ‘I am the true bread’, ‘I am the bread of life sent down from heaven’ (6:32f). Now, as they partake of the fruit of the vine in remembrance of him, he tells them ‘I am the true vine’. Just as Jesus is the bread of life, so the vine is also a symbol of life. He is the source of life and fruitfulness for all who abide in him.

The vine metaphor was not new to Jesus or the Jews. Vineyards could be seen everywhere in Palestine. Jesus freely used the picture of Israel as a vineyard in his parables. Moreover the OT prophets also pictured Israel as a vine or vineyard (Isaiah 5, Ezekiel 15, 17). They told the

people of God they were unproductive, that they failed to produce fruit of righteousness and justice, and that the Lord would cut them off (Isaiah 5:7).

With the old vine failing to bear fruit and being cut off, Jesus comes along as the true vine with the promise of new life and much fruit for the glory of God the Father. Jesus is the vine and there are two types of branches – those that bear fruit and those that do not. This extended metaphor also includes the Father as the vinedresser or gardener.

Fruitful Branches

Jesus likens himself to a vine, in fact to a rootstock, in this metaphor. We do not see the part of a vine or a tree that lies beneath the surface and tend to forget its importance. It is a rule of thumb that whatever growth is above the ground there is an equal amount below. It is the roots that supply water and nutrients to the branches, maintaining life and promoting the production of fruit.

The disciples were *already clean because of the word* Jesus spoke to them. They were grafted in by grace, through believing in Jesus. Jesus does not use the word grafted, but Paul does in an extension of this metaphor. Writing to the Gentiles Paul said that the Jews were broken off because of unbelief *and you stand by faith* (Romans 11:20). Ultimately it is the work of the Father, the gardener, to graft in whom he chooses (6:44, 15:16).

The focus of Jesus is not so much on how they came to be in the vine but on upon their remaining in the vine. *Abide in me and I in you* he said (15:4). The branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains in the vine. ‘You can do nothing without me’ said Jesus ‘but if you abide in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit’ (15:5).

What an amazing promise! The metaphor is simple is it not? Jesus told his disciples he would send the Holy Spirit. In fact he and his Father also would come and make their home in the person who loves and obeys Jesus (14:23). Now he tells them they must abide in him. They must consciously cling to Jesus and depend on him for words and power to work and witness for him.

The verse which the Lord laid on my heart when we were called to the mission field was I Thessalonians 2:8. After being there some time another verse gave me comfort and strength – I Peter 4:11. *If anyone speaks let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers let him do it with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God might be glorified through Jesus Christ.* In other words, God gives the words and God gives the strength to witness and serve him. This is what it means to abide in Christ.

What is the fruit pictured in this metaphor? It is something which brings glory to the Father (15:8). It is something which confirms they are Jesus disciples. It comes in answer to prayer (15:7). It is the desire of the disciples. What is the desire of any disciple of Jesus? To please Jesus! ‘A true disciple prays for fruits, for these fruits are pleasing to God. He asks God to give whatever is in accordance with his will’ (Hendriksen).

Love, joy, and peace are spoken of by Jesus in this discourse (13:34, 14:27, 15:11), and also occur among the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. The fruits are actually gifts of Jesus. *Being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Christ Jesus* says Paul (Philippians 1:11). Remember the necessity to remain in the vine!

Jesus spoke of pruning the branches that bear fruit so that they will yield more fruit. Every horticulturalist knows the importance of pruning a vine or tree in order to get larger fruit and higher production. But does every Christian know the place of trials and testing in making them more fruitful in their life? Job knew what it meant to be pruned, as did the apostle Paul (II Corinthians 11). Still today evangelists in India often get harassed and beaten, and in China they get beaten and imprisoned.

Have we become leafy branches with little fruit? Remember the fig tree that Jesus cursed because it had only leaves (Matthew 21:19). Are you in need of pruning? Are you ready if the Father begins to prune?

Unfruitful Branches

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he (the Father) takes away/lifts up (15:2). If anyone does not abide in me he is cast out as a branch and is withered (15:6) . What was Jesus referring to here? Arminians latch onto these verses claiming they show that it is possible for one who is saved to be lost. But such teaching clearly conflicts with the rest of Scripture (e.g. John.10:28, Romans 8:35f).

What has just happened here in the upper room? While celebrating the Passover with his twelve disciples, one of them, Judas Iscariot, left to betray Jesus. After being with Jesus for three years Judas turned out to be a devil (6:70). He appeared to be a branch on this vine but by his fruit, or lack thereof, he was shown to be dead.

Some who are baptised, and who partake of the Lord's Supper are just as dead as Judas. Like the tares in the wheat crop that Jesus spoke about, so these phoney branches will be cut off and thrown into the fire to burn. Remember, many will cry out Lord! Lord! have we not done this, have we not done that for you. But Jesus will declare *I never knew you; depart from me you who practice lawlessness* (Matthew 7:23). These are solemn words of warning still today to all who call themselves Christians, even those who partake of the blessed sacraments.

Obedience! Fruit! This is what Jesus is looking for. Where is the fruit in your life? Are you truly abiding in Jesus or are you just an adherent going through the motions of being as good person. If so repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ before you are cast out to the same end as Judas.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon