



Sermon: - 2nd April 2017

Jesus the True Vine

1 John 4: 7-21; John 15:1-8

Jesus said “I am the True Vine” ... This is one of the “I am” sayings which punctuate John’s Gospel, “I am the good shepherd ... I am the Bread of life ... I am the way, the truth and the life”. They are the bedrock of the gospel of John, the foundation on which the rest of the gospel is built. In the other gospels Jesus is almost self-effacing; he tries to remain mysteriously anonymous. The oft repeated refrain in the other Gospels is a puzzling phrase: “tell no-one”, a startling contrast to this declaration, “I am!” Only in John’s gospel do we hear these explicit claims as to who he is and what he came for. In John’s gospel, in contrast to the other Gospels, Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah, the son of God, in fact he almost advertises himself. In the narrative of his meeting with the Samaritan woman, which we considered a couple of weeks ago, we hear him tell her that he is the Christ, the one who is to come. It’s pretty explicit! But there is a sense in which these sayings of Jesus, the “I am” sayings, and the conversations that surround them conceal the truth about the God we worship and the Lord we follow as much as they reveal that the truth. They reveal the truth because they are offered to us like mini-parables; a large truth contained in a small package.

Or perhaps we could think of these sayings as being like an icon, painting with a picture something words struggle to describe – fuelling our imagination and inspiring our worship. But just as the truth is not necessarily clearly stated in either a parable or in an icon, we have to work at discerning it, so it is with these sayings of Jesus. We have to engage prayerfully with these sayings to discover the meaning, so that the truth they contain can be revealed to us.

So this morning let’s engage with this icon of the Lord as the vine in an attitude of prayer and openness: “I am the true vine” he said. What does he mean? The word that describes the vine, the word translated “true”, is the same word that Pilate uses when he interrogates Jesus: “What is truth?”, or in other words “what is true; what is real?” That is one of the central preoccupations of John’s gospel. What is truth? How do we know it when we see it? How do we get it? And what do we do with it when we have got it?

When we reflect deeply on this, and the other “I am” sayings, they can, and will, interact with our own thoughts and imagination and concerns. The bible, if we read it carefully and with respect, will do that. There is often a temptation to impose our own prejudices and preoccupations on the text. I wonder how often we see what we want to see when we read the Bible rather than what is actually there. One of the first things I learnt when I went to university to do my BD was that we are not neutral when we read the Bible. We bring to it our history, our prior understanding, own desires and preconceptions. We are not neutral and that is a problem which we need to guard against. But when we read the Bible with respect and openness it changes and challenges us; it will empty us and then renew us, and then it may motivate us to take action.

So what does this saying that we consider this morning mean? “I am the vine.” I am sure that Jesus used this image deliberately. He was taking an image which was known to his hearers as an image of Israel, and applying it to himself. The vine was a symbol of Israel: of God’s holy people. So for a moment let’s consider this symbol and its relationship to Israel.

You can take the Israelites of Egypt, but you can’t take Egypt out of the Israelites! At least, you can but it takes 40 years. But after the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness, and been renewed and restored, God, in an act of wonderful grace, transplanted them into Canaan, a land, as we recall, which was flowing with milk and honey. If ever a nation had everything it needed to succeed, it was Israel at this point in time. But in this land of plenty, where they wanted for nothing, the vine that was Israel produced wild grapes. ...Instead of practising justice, Israel practised oppression, instead of righteousness, Israel produced unrighteousness.

In Isaiah 5:4-7, we read the voice of the Lord exclaiming in exasperation, “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house 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.”

This is the constant cry of the prophets throughout the Old Testament writings. Historic Israel is often referred to by this metaphor, and every time the vine’s failure to produce

good fruit is emphasized and God's judgment on the nation is highlighted. God tends the vine, but it produces poor fruit or none, and so God has to deal with the nation Israel and chasten it. This is never to any effect. The vine continues to grow wild.

And these words of Jesus' were spoken in the heart of Israel, in Jerusalem, on the eve of his own death. He spoke of himself provocatively as the true vine, the true Israel, the true place of encounter with God, on the eve of his trial and condemnation by the old Israel. The old Israel had failed to usher in the kingdom of God; Jesus was the new Israel, and would bring about the kingdom of God.

But in spite of this, in the present day has anything really changed, as regards organised religion? At the risk of being provocative, think of the state of the Holy Land in our own times. A place of warfare and siege; divided communities and divided nations. Or across the water in Ireland, where a fragile peace has been achieved, but war has been waged and many have died in the name of our faith for too many years. Time and time again actions are taken in the name of our God which are very far from being inspired by the love of which John speaks. No wonder religion has become anathema to many. Where is the evidence of this love of which we read this morning in the letter of John? Ancient Israel has its counterpart in people who profess faith today; those who say they love God but do not act lovingly. Who produce only bad fruit, wild grapes.

And just as in Jesus' day, when the Israelites turned from God again and again and again, there are no easy answers to the problems of faithlessness. There are no simple solutions to bitter conflicts between warring factions, whether they are within the one faith or between faiths. Human beings are quarrelsome by nature.

Sitting here this morning, in the peace of Campsie, is easy to think, "This has nothing to do with me!" But maybe the words of Jesus "I am the true vine" are more challenging than we perceive them. How can we, branches of the true vine, bear good fruit in a world where injustice, guerrilla warfare, and intifada are a daily reality? Religion is perceived as the source of so much of the world's disorder. Many people have turned their back on religion, not because they don't believe in God, but because they don't believe in the God they see portrayed in the militaristic groups of this world who carry out dreadful acts in the name of religion. Faced with that, do we engage with the full reality that religion to some degree has created? What can we do about it?

As Christians I believe we cannot simply spiritualise our beliefs. As branches of the true vine we cannot remain indifferent to the world's disorder and the part religion has played and will play in fomenting it. As branches of the true vine we have a part to play in bearing fruit in the barren terrain of a world in pain. Jesus tells us to bear fruit; this is not just a suggestion that we become better people; this is a call to action!

"I am the vine, I you are the branches." When we consider the meaning of these words, we understand this means we are members one of another within this community of faith. That we are the branches of the true vine. But it also means that we have been commissioned, and indeed trained and disciplined, pruned is how John puts it, commissioned, trained, and disciplined to bear fruit. And if Jesus was comparing himself to Israel, through whom the kingdom of God was meant to come, and we are the new Israel, joined to him to bear good fruit, then we are also called to unite for action in a world and for a world whose pain cannot be assuaged by politicians or freedom fighters or extremists. The Philosopher, Theodore Zeldin, says "It is in the power of everybody, with a little courage, to hold out a hand to someone different, to listen, and to attempt to increase, even by a tiny amount, the quantity of kindness and humanity in the world". In John's gospel we read that Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches". Still today he says to us, "you are indeed the branches, go and bear fruit, good fruit, fruit that will last."