



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 9th May 2021

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-11; Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17

Last words have their own grim charm. There is the dignity of Marie Antionette's 'Pardonnez moi Monsieur' to her executioner, the reputed drollery of Voltaire who when asked by a priest if he wished to renounce Satan replied 'Now is not the time for making new enemies', and the misplaced optimism of the Union Army General John Sedgewick, 'They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist...' as he was shot in mid-sentence.

'... I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last ...' (Jn 15:16)

Not quite Jesus' last words, but almost, for in John they are part of the so-called farewell discourse which takes place on the eve of his betrayal. But it is in these chapters that John reveals to us the meaning and implication of God's reaching out to the universe in the incarnation of Jesus. Appointed to bear fruit, for the metaphor that John and Jesus are exploring is that of Jesus the true vine. Jesus the vine, the Father the vine-grower, those who abide, the branches, fruit-bearing. It is an intensely relational, organic image, holding Father, Son and disciples in intimate interaction. 'I am the true vine (says Jesus) and my Father is the vinedresser (Jn 15:1)...' 'I have appointed you to bear fruit'.

Last month as Spring frosts descended in France, our news screens filled with pictures of terraces glowing with candle light as vine-growers sought desperately to save the wine harvest. There is nothing easy or automatic about vines. They demand care and management.

I am, as my wife will confirm, no gardener. The best I aspire to is incompetent labourer. I am not allowed near the pruning shears. But I gather from listening to those who know, and from reading a bit, that pruning is an essential part of the operation. Unless the apple tree is properly pruned, it will grow all over the place and there will be fewer apples. Its about getting rid of the unimportant and enabling the important. The same applies to vines apparently, and as I'm a fan of the fruit of the vine, I'm all for encouraging pruning vines. Pruning is about, in Jesus' words, '...bearing fruit, fruit that will last.'(v.16)

Spiritually, pruning is about the life of the true vine which is Christ becoming more and more manifest in the quality of the branches. At the heart of the metaphor of the vine is a concept which is central to John's understanding of the way God acts. Fruit-bearing results from 'abiding'. The verb (*meno*) describes how the vine relates to its branches (v 4), Jesus to his followers (vv. 5-7), his word to the disciples (v 7), the disciples to Jesus' love (v 9), and Jesus' relationship with his Father (v. 10). There's something almost maternal about the image – abiding isn't an option, its far more organic than that – its life-blood, placenta like.

And it produces, John tells us joy, and love, and friendship. Fruit that will last. Its all to easy to jump from that to assumptions about the fruit of abiding and drawing up mission agendas. But John doesn't do that. There is no speculation in his gospel about what that fruit might be. It is fundamentally about relationship. Its about living in God through Christ the vine – no longer servants but friends, filled with Christ's joy, and not forgetting that these are last words – bound to God through the love of Christ who was to lay down his life for his friends – 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends.'

Once the disciples become 'friends' of Jesus, they are as it were on the 'inside' of revelation. The concept of 'friends' carries some theological weight. The remarkable way in which Jesus re-constitutes

the master-slave relationship into friendship echoes the ways in which the Hebrew Scriptures describe Abraham and Moses as friends of God, and the beautiful picture of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8 – ‘I will love those who love me / and those who seek me diligently find me.’ Love is central – God so loved the world, Jesus loved his own to the end, and the new commandment for the new age is love one another as I have loved you. The love that drives the incarnation is the love that forges the church by transforming disciples into friends of God.

The true vine, then, is about understanding not power – the intimate knowing between Father and Son thrown open to all who believe. Abiding, remaining and friendship belong together in John’s mind. Jesus’ work is to draw believers into the communion of love and knowledge which he shares with the Father. It is about participation and union, about partaking in the life of God, being the ‘friends’ of Jesus. No greater love can be shown than what Jesus does on the cross - laying down his life for his friends. So this sharing in the life of God is cross-shaped.

The community that results is charged to abide in the vine. If we return to the farewell discourse we can begin to flesh out what that means. Abide in the vine – do not let your hearts be troubled – this is the place I prepare for you. (Jn 14:1); do not let your hearts be troubled – abide in the peace that I give which is not as the world gives (14:27). Abiding in the vine is first of all about receiving all the benefits of Christ’s passion. It is about acceptance, restfulness, peace. But the vine is not static, it is dynamic, organic, growing. Our experience of the risen Christ, John is telling us, is primarily one of joy and peace and delight. It is about growing in love of God along with all the other disciples of Christ who are joined in the vine, all being pruned and cleansed through the judiciousness of the choices God invites us to make to become more fully who God calls us to be.

It is worth pausing there a moment because this is so unlike the driven, guilt-ridden narcissism which often gets confused with Protestantism. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve come away from church more depressed than I went in. You might well say that’s because I spend so much time listening to my own preaching. But actually there’s nothing we enjoy more than a god wallow in sin – the world is screwed up: my fault; wars and famine ravage the continents: my fault; poverty and racism are endemic: my fault: climate change is destroying the earth: my fault. And do you know Lord, if I get it right, and read *The Guardian* just like you do, then your kingdom might just have a chance. The hubris of it is devastating.

What matters rather is ‘abiding’, the astonishing gift of sharing the relational space that Jesus by right shares with the Father, being, as it were grafted into the life of the Trinity itself, delighting in our friendship with Jesus, and letting the effects of that friendship flow into our relationships and living. Enjoying God. It was enjoined upon our tradition by the Westminster Catechism of 1648, but you get the idea it never caught on.

Love one another isn’t an ethical injunction. You can’t order love and gentleness and kindness, as any good marriage guidance counsellor would tell you. You can’t command someone to become Mother Teresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Oscar Romero. Rather it is by their fruits that we shall know them, the fruit of abiding in the true vine.

It matters where you abide. In our OT lection Isaiah of the exile wrote during the grim days of the exile in Babylon. Many chose to assimilate, to accept the Babylonian yoke, earn a day’s bread, keep family and soul together.

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
Come to the waters:
And you that have no money
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
And your labour for that which does not satisfy? (Is 55: 1-2)

Be part of Nebuchadnezzar's economy if you like, obey the IMF, surf the waves of Keynes or Hayek, whichever money guru happens to be 'in'. Eat the bread of the Establishment and be owned, but know that there is another bread, and wine and milk, free, the gift of grace, a different way of life, God's way. Follow that, and a few verses later 'You shall go out with joy, and be led back home in peace as the mountains burst into song and the fields clap their hands.

It matters where you abide. Peter, in our NT reading, faithful to the Jewish way of life, devoutly broken disciple of Jesus, went to the house of an unclean unacceptable outsider, a Roman, an occupier, because the Spirit prompted him, preached and found his Roman hearers full of the Spirit. Astounded, taken aback, shocked to his core – 'Can anyone withhold the waters for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' The American Methodist bishop Will Willimon once noted that throughout Acts the people the Spirit shocks most are already in the church!

It matters where you abide, in the true vine, tended by the God of infinite surprise and unlimited love. May we too abide, enjoy, and go and bear fruit. Amen.