

The Vine (1) - our first service meeting with Partick Free Church

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[0 : 00] But apart from drinking copious amounts of wine, Scots don't really know much about vines and vineyards.

I had never seen a vineyard, that is until 2019 when Phil Stogner, who's sitting upstairs, took me to visit one of his friends in South Carolina, a man called David Swain.

Now David has 12 acres of vineyard growing muscadine grapes, which I believe are a variety of grape, only grown in the southeastern states of the United States.

And he took us in his golf cart round his vineyard and he explained to me the details of how to grow grapes that are good enough to make wine. I was very impressed with Mr. Swain's vineyard.

I have to say I was even more impressed with Mr. Swain himself. Later that year, my family and I took a short holiday to Corfu.

[1 : 03] You'll know the Greek Orthodox Church is very strong in Corfu. And as you'll know that, unlike us, they don't have a problem with painting images of Jesus. And by far the most common image they paint of Jesus in Corfu, the Greek Orthodox Church, is that of Jesus as the vine, ho ampelos.

It also helps, of course, that Corfu is full of vineyards and they produce their own fine quantities of wine there. So what as we think of Jesus in terms of the good shepherd or the divine fisherman, Greek Orthodox Christians think of him as the vine.

Over the last couple of years, these events have fused together in my mind and heart. Visiting a vineyard in South Carolina and experiencing Greek Orthodox Christianity in Corfu, I've begun to value the imagery of Jesus as the vine in a way that I never had before.

And so it's quite natural that I choose as my text for this first momentous morning the words of Jesus in John 15, 5. I am the vine and you are the branches.

Jesus often used images to describe his mission among us. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life. But it's this one.

[2 : 28] I am the vine. You are the branches, which I want to consider with you this morning for a short while. For some of you, this might be your first ever time in church.

For others, you've been coming to church your whole life. But there's something for all of us in these words. Before we begin proper, let me give you the big theme of this image.

And actually of everything that a Christian believes. Everything a Christian believes. It's all about our relationship to Jesus Christ.

It's all about our connection with him. You might think of church as a quaint throwback to earlier times and we Christians as being naive and somehow medieval.

And perhaps we are. But listen, at its most basic level, Christianity ain't about wooden pews and musty Bibles and archaic rules.

[3 : 35] Christianity is about a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's consider this image in John 15, 5 in two ways.

First, Jesus the vine. And then secondly, we the branches. And all the time as we're going through this verse, ask yourself the question, whether this is your first time in church or your millionth time in church, do I have a living relationship with Jesus Christ?

Am I a Christian? Next week, we'll look a bit deeper into what it means to cultivate that relationship with Jesus. But just stick with me today as we discover in what senses Jesus is the vine.

Jesus is the vine. And we are his branches. First of all then, Jesus the vine. He begins this verse by saying, I am the vine.

Earlier in chapter 15 in verse 1, he says of himself, I am the true vine. As I said earlier, we don't really have vineyards in Scotland, so the image is perhaps rather lost in us.

[4 : 43] But for those of you who perhaps have lived in warmer climates, where grapes grow freely, a climate like the Israel of Jesus' day, this image was very relevant, powerful.

They were as familiar with vines as we are with sheep. Just like all of us can tell the difference between a cheviot and a blackface, so they know all about vines.

Now, the vine itself is the trunk or the stem of the plant from which grows the fruit-bearing branches. It's the vine which is rooted into the ground and in which the life of the whole plant consists.

The life-giving sap courses through the vine and is sent out into all the branches, enabling and allowing the grapes to form and fruit to grow.

And so in the very first instance, when Jesus talks of himself as being the vine, we are to appreciate the central importance of the person Jesus Christ to Christianity.

[5 : 51] A Christianity without Jesus Christ is unthinkable and impossible. Jesus is at the heart of all we believe and all we are.

You can take all the pews away. You can take all our buildings away. You can take all our people away. But without Jesus, there is no Christianity. You can take all our songs away.

You can take all our history away. You can take all our institutions away. But without Jesus, there is no Christianity. You can't have branches without a stem and you can't have grapes without a vine. You cannot have Christianity without Christ. I know that sounds really basic. Indeed, it's really basic.

But tell me, how many of us have been Christians, perhaps here, for decades? But Jesus Christ has lost his centrality in our lives.

[6 : 58] Taken up with a thousand other things. Yes, even good things like family and work and church. But Jesus isn't at the center. True Christianity must have Jesus at the center.

He is the vine. And notice, when we speak of Jesus being the vine, we're not speaking of an it. A set of beliefs. A list of rules.

We're speaking of a person. He is the vine. Again, perhaps there are times when some of us are guilty of forgetting the centrality of Jesus, the person, and of living in a vital personal relationship with him.

Our Christianity is not ultimately about a heritage. It's about a person. It's about a person. Not a program, but a person. About the most wonderful, fascinating, amazing person to have ever lived. And so again, I ask you, do you have a personal living relationship with Jesus Christ, the vine?

[8 : 11] And so already from these four short words, I am the vine, we have both the centrality and the personality of Jesus Christ. But there's more.

There's so much more. Jesus says of himself, I am the vine. I am the vine. Now, perhaps you don't see much significance in Jesus saying of himself, I am.

But remember, the Gospel of John is part of the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

Likewise, the Gospel of John wasn't originally written in English, but in Greek.

The words, I am, in Greek, are a name. They are the Greek translation of the Hebrew name for God, the name Yahweh, the name God gave himself in the Old Testament.

And so when Jesus says, I am, he's telling us something very important about himself. He's telling us that he is none other than God himself.

[9 : 22] Now, the disciples to whom he was speaking understood the point fine well, just as I hope we understand it today. Earlier on, I spoke of Jesus as being the most wonderful, fascinating, and amazing man to ever have lived.

But now we learn, he wasn't just a man. He was God. And I'm not saying this is easy to understand. This is the first time you've been in church, and the first time you've heard this, and you're thinking, wow, that's mysterious.

I think the same thing. That Jesus Christ was both God and man. It is of the essence of the mystery of Christianity. And yet here it is in John 15, 5, in black and white, Jesus claiming to be more than just a man.

He's claiming to be God. Many years ago, the writer C.S. Lewis, famous for his line, The Witch and the Wardrobe fantasy series, wrote a newspaper article challenging people to take what Jesus said about himself seriously, and to think about it.

C.S. Lewis challenged us, was Jesus mad to say such things about himself, that he is both God and man? There are many people in mental institutions in Glasgow who claim to be God.

[10 : 41] Was Jesus mad to say such a thing? Was Jesus bad to say such a thing? Over the years, there have been many wicked rulers and evil people who have claimed to be God.

Was Jesus bad, one of them? Take a wider look at the life of Jesus, at the things he did, at the things he said. Was the man who spoke forth the beauty of the Sermon on the Mount mad? Was the man who healed blind people bad? C.S. Lewis challenged us to think of a third option. When Jesus claimed to be God, he was neither mad nor bad, but telling the truth about himself. Don't ask me how to explain how this is physically or psychologically possible, but a ruthless search for truth leads here.

Jesus, both man and God. Many people say they don't believe in God. But if you believe that Jesus spoke the truth about himself, then he is God, and you do believe in him.

[11 : 58] The question of whether in order to believe in Jesus, you have to believe first in God is one which John would never have dreamt of asking. I guess it's a question you might ask. That even if you say today, I struggle to believe in God, if you believe in Jesus Christ, you do believe in God.

In many ways, Jesus is your introduction to who God is. Why do you suppose Christians stake their lives on Jesus?

Why do you suppose the early Christians were willing to die in the Roman arena rather than renounce their faith in him? It was and is because Jesus is central to us.

He's the beginning and he's the middle and the end of our lives. He is the most important person in the world to us. But there's one last thing I want to say about Jesus being the vine.

Jesus does not say, I was the vine or I will be the vine. He says, I am the vine. The issue is this.

[13 : 15] If, as I said in my introduction, a relationship with Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christianity, then surely if we are to have a living relationship with him, he must also be alive.

He must also be I am. Now remember, Jesus said these words on the night of his betrayal. The next day in just a few hours he would die on a Roman cross as the sacrifice for all our sins.

But on the third day he would rise to new life and even today he reigns from the throne of his God and Father in heaven.

This vine lives. And this is how we as his branches can live and be fruitful. he lives and he invites us into personal relationship with himself.

True Christianity has Christ at its center. Not just any Christ but the man who is God, the living vine, Christ Jesus.

[14 : 26] now I guess there may be some among us this morning who have little time for institutions and for songs and for buildings and for heritage and for tradition and for musty old views.

That's fine. Let me tell you that for thousands of years Jesus Christ has made life worth living for billions of people.

That he as the vine has given us life and hope and meaning and for that we follow and praise him. He is the vine will you be his branch.

Jesus the vine. And then second we the branches we the branches on the night of his betrayal the evening before his death he told his disciples I am the vine you are the branches.

Earlier on that evening as we read as we read in John chapter 13 in verse 33 Jesus said little children I shall be with you only a little while longer you will seek me and as I said to the Jews where I am going you cannot come so now I say to you.

[15 : 51] Jesus is telling his disciples that he's going away. A reference to his death on the cross and then his ascension into heaven. And of course the disciples they're troubled.

They follow Jesus for the last three years. He has been central to their lives but now he's leaving him. Now he's leaving them. And in their minds therefore that central relationship with Jesus which once they enjoyed will soon be over.

Now I'm sure we've all been in this kind of situation. When I left home to go to university I promised I'd keep up with my friends back home in the highlands.

Nothing would change. We'd always be close. The reality turned out somewhat different. It is inevitable. And so the disciples thought here our relationship with Jesus is over.

But whatever they had thought in John 15:5 he now reassures them that his connection to them and their connection with him is unbreakable.

[17:11] I am the vine you are the branches. Jesus is going away but in days to come that relationship he's always had with them will deepen will grow will take root.

His relationship with them is unbreakable by death. Though he dies yet he remains the vine, and they will always remain connected to him.

Though they die he remains the vine and remains connected to him. Nothing separates them from him. You know in the Old Testament the Old Testament which evangelical atheists tell us is full of anger and wrath and judgment God says of himself that he's the friend who sticks closer than any brother.

Jesus was described by his enemies as the friend of sinners. And later on in the Bible the Apostle Paul tells us nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We live in a world of fake friendships friendships but this is the great unbreakable connection. Jesus is the vine we are the branches the great unbreakable connection of Christ and his people.

[18:43] now what is of central importance to the health of the branches is the health of the central vine. If that central vine has shallow roots or is withering in the intense heat if it's infected with a disease or a pest it will the branches will soon fall off and die.

I grew up on the east coast of Sutherland the finest county in the whole of the United Kingdom don't you think Cathy? It is still an area with a very wide diversity of trees and so I'm used to watching trees growing and trees dying.

A tree may have healthy branches but its trunk be rotten but within a couple of years the branches themselves will begin to die and the whole tree will decompose from the trunk outwards.

But what then for us? If we are the branches of Jesus can we have confidence that the central trunk Jesus himself will always be healthy so that we too can live?

Again some of the forests where I'm from are managed by the Duke of Southern's the States and every so often his woodsmen will walk through the forest and they will paint an orange cross on the trunk of trees which they think are ready to be felled.

[20:12] And when you come across that orange tree painted on a tree though the tree itself be healthy you know it is doomed to a forester's chainsaw. What then for us?

How can we be sure as Christians how can we be confident that our central trunk the vine Jesus Christ does not have an orange cross painted on him?

that he is not to be cut down and burned. That is why it is so important for us as Christians to have confidence in who Jesus Christ is.

The great I am the true vine no blemish or disease in Jesus though the whole world be consumed by fire or by water yet he will remain.

if you are a branch don't start worrying about the health of the vine. If you are a Christian don't start worrying that somehow Jesus will stop giving you strength stop giving you life hope purpose forgiveness love not only is his connection with us unbreakable his goodness toward us is unending what is of primary importance to the branch isn't just the health of the vine but it is that the life giving sap from the vine the central trunk reaches the branches because it is the vine which gives life to the branches and makes the branches fruitful.

[21:48] Just like the sap comes from the vine and gives life to the branches so Jesus gives life to us as his disciples. There is an image here an image we are going to look at next week which Jesus reinforces by using the words abide in me remain in me and in so many ways therefore we are coming back to the points we made earlier on namely the centrality of Jesus Christ in the life of the Christian just like the vine is central to the life fertility fruitfulness of the branches so if we want to be fruitful as Christians if we want to experience the life of Christ running through our veins the joy the peace the comfort the love the hope the forgiveness then we need to make sure not just that our relationship with Jesus is central to us but that it continues to be central to us oh there's a bug springing from the trunk but then it's lost its connection with the vine before it even begins to grow the branch will never ever bear fruit unless it's connected to the vine it is not enough listen carefully to me all of you it is not enough that someone should say today

I believe in Jesus we must keep on believing in Jesus keep on growing as Christians daily drawing life and strength from Jesus as we close I want to draw us back to what is perhaps the most counterintuitive truth in all this passage we live in a world which is all about me my choices my

freedom of expression my happiness Jesus image of the vine and the branches it blows that me culture out of the water he's telling us that the pursuit of satisfaction and pleasure and fruitfulness in life consists in having him at the center of our lives and not ourselves you really think that living for yourself will make you satisfied and fill you with meaning and purpose that's not the way you've been made it is only in a living relationship with Jesus Christ through faith it is only in a real and living connection with him that we really begin to experience life in all its fullness it's only as we make the vine central to us that we have purpose and meaning in all we do and in all we are that's why

Jesus says apart from me you can do nothing Scotland it is not in the drinking of the fruit of the vine you will find pleasure Scotland it is only in the true vine Jesus Christ and in relationship to him how then can you connect with Jesus Christ today how can you become a branch through which the life giving sap of Jesus runs it's really very simple it's faith faith faith in him it is putting him first in your life it is making him the center it's giving over your life to him it's committing your life to him and you know this is the strange bit the strange bit it is only in giving over your life to Jesus that you'll begin to experience for the first time the real fullness of life it is only in giving over your life to Jesus that you'll experience the forgiveness of your sins the removal of your shame real joy real peace real hope it's only in Jesus only in the vine come today to Jesus Christ for he says I am the vine and you are the branches