Authentic Christianity

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[0:00] If you can turn back with me then to John's Gospel, chapter 15, and the main text that the sermon is based on this morning is verse 1, where Jesus says, I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser or the gardener.

I want to explore two things with you from this passage. Firstly, Christ's claim to be the true vine. And secondly, Christ comments on what I'm calling authentic Christianity. Before I do so, I want to recap on those seven I am sayings.
Perhaps you're here today and you didn't hear the other I am sayings. To put you into the picture, there are seven I am sayings, sayings where Jesus begins what is about to say with the words, I am.
There are seven such sayings in John's Gospel. The first one is in chapter 6, where Jesus says, I am the bread of life.
[1:30] And then in chapter 8, he says, I am the light of the world. And then in chapter 10, he says, I am the door through me.

If any human being enters in, he or she shall be saved. And also in chapter 10, he says, I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. And then in chapter 11, he says, I am the resurrection and the life.
And then in chapter 14, he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me.
And here he says, this is his final I am saying, I am the true vine. Also, so notice these as you're going through John's Gospel yourself.
[2:33] If I was talking to an English class, I might say that this is a literary device that John uses. It's not a literary device for John.

It's a theological device in connection with the identity of Jesus Christ. I also want you to notice that John uses another device called signs.
And sometimes those signs converge with the I am saying. For example, they converged when he said, I am the resurrection and the life.
So watch out for these as well. These signs that John uses to structure his gospel. These are staggering claims of Jesus, surely.
Is that not a fair thing to say? And they represent part of the claims that Jesus makes about his identity.
[3:42] They represent something of his own self-consciousness of being in the Father and of the Father being in him.

No figure in history, as far as I am aware, has ever made such astounding claims. Because of the unique nature of those claims, I believe Jesus leaves us only a few options.
He's either deluded, a liar, or God manifest in the flesh. Jesus once put this searching question to his disciples.
Who do you say I am? Maybe he's asking you this very question this morning.
I wonder what your answer would be. Let's turn to this passage then and look at this final claim of Jesus.
[4:54] I am the true vine. The context of this claim, you'll remember, is Jesus is 24 hours from hanging on a cross.

This is what commentators have called Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples.
And what Jesus is endeavouring to do is to bring comfort and encouragement to them.

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Remember at the beginning of chapter 14, let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. And it's not without interest that in the latter part of chapter 14, Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit.
And it's not without interest that there's a tremendous emphasis on loving one another. This great commandment that Jesus leaves with his disciples.
[6:19] Jesus doesn't simply say, I am the vine. He says, I am the true vine.

What does he mean? The word true has the idea of the real.
As opposed to the mythical. Or as opposed to a symbol. And it's almost as if Jesus was saying, I have always been the real vine.
And if you like, I am what the true vine looks like.
That life that I have lived out before you, that love for you, that love for those that are outside of our circle, that love for humanity, that reaching out to them, that wanting to offer them the life that is the life eternal.
[7:45] But, why does Jesus use at this point this metaphor?

And we've got really a seismic shift here. Instead of Israel being the vine, Jesus Christ is the vine. If you like, he's Israel. Jesus, in using this metaphor, is alluding to something that is very, very well known within the nation at that time.
There were hundreds, and no doubt, thousands of vines in Israel. And the vine was something that was economically important, apart from anything else, in vineyards.
Josephus, a Jewish historian of the second century AD, he tells us that the symbol of the vine was in coins and on ceramics.
[8:56] And he also tells us that in the grounds of the temple, that there was a gold statue of the vine. But, of course, the symbol applied mostly to Israel and to their calling.

That's what this vine infers. I've called you, Israel. I've chosen you to be fruitful for me. I've chosen you to be a light to the nations.
I've chosen you to show righteousness. It's interesting that every instance of reference to the vine in the Old Testament is an instance of judgment.
Just like the one that we read in Isaiah 7. And so, Jesus' claim is revolutionary.
It's often hard for us to feel the charge of some of these comments that Jesus makes because we are so used to them. But at the time when people first heard them, they were jaw-dropping.
[10:08] Israel is no longer the vine. Jesus has replaced Israel as God's vine. He is the new Israel. No longer is Israel the guardian of God's covenant or calling.

No longer is Israel God's vine. No longer are God's redeemed people synonymous or restricted to Israel, but every single person who puts their trust in Jesus becomes part of the vine.
Let me ask you, are you in the vine? and I'm deliberately asking it even using this terminology because as we'll see when I get to the second point, this is the pulse of essential Christianity.
And not only is Jesus claiming to be the true vine and he's always been the true vine and he's the real Israel, he's also claiming that he alone is the true vine.
Not so much contrasted with a false vine but a failed vine. Or with mythical ideas of contemporary Gnosticism.
[11:33] A grouping that had some way out ideas at times. I don't want to go into that because I don't have time to go into it. But the key thing is this, the vine is now a person, not a nation.

Jesus Christ, son of man, son of God the Father. And it follows, does it not then, that being in the vine is now nothing to do with ethnicity or being born in Israel or any other mythical ideas but by being united with Christ, being in union with him, believing and following him.
Before I leave this first point, Jesus' claim to be the true vine, there's something else that's interesting about this I am statement.
Usually, in all the other I am statements, Jesus only makes one predicate, if you like, one qualifier of that I am.
But he makes a second one here, which is very, very important. I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.
[13:02] Jesus never acted alone, but always in unison with God the Father. Throughout John's Gospel, it is almost, if I could say, stressed ad nauseam that Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus and that Jesus does absolutely nothing and says nothing except what the Father says.

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It is the Father that has sent him to be the vine. It is the Father who tends the vine. This unity of purpose and will reflects the unity of being between Jesus Christ, God's Son, and God the Father. Or if I could put it this way, it's reflecting the ontological unity of the Father and the Son. I don't usually like using any technical words in a sermon, but I decided I would just use that one today. If you want to know what it means, come and talk to me. As I said earlier, Jesus is conscious of a reciprocal and mutual indwelling between himself and God, a oneness expressed right at the very beginning of John's Gospel.
Remember when we looked at the beginning of John's Gospel, and it opens up with these explosive words, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
[14:51] The theme is stated in the opening breath of John's Gospel. theme of that oneness and that unity.

This oneness is of great importance, I suggest to you. This oneness of the Father dwelling in Jesus and Jesus dwelling in the Father is of great importance for authentic Christianity.
real Christianity, you see, biblical Christianity is modelled on the unity of the Father and the Son. Christianity, therefore, is a relational, reciprocal, mutual indwelling of the believer with Jesus Christ. And before we go on to that, can I ask again, are you in the vine?
Do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ? You're in the church today, I'm not asking that question, I'm asking, are you in Christ?
[16:09] Are you in the vine? I'm asking, have you not so much an intellectual grasp about Jesus, I'm asking if you have a live relationship with Jesus?

Which brings me to my second point, Christ's comments on authentic Christianity. Where is the core, the pulse, the real heartbeat of biblical, authentic Christianity?
Christianity? Where is the life blood that courses through real Christianity? Where is it to be found? Not in creeds, not in buildings, not in its clergy, bishops, popes, or patriarchs, not even in the church.
church. The church, as we have seen, isn't the vine. That's not what is being said. Jesus didn't say the church is the vine.
He said, I am the vine. The life blood of Christianity is only located in one place or rather one person, Jesus Christ.
[17:30] The risen, living, exalted Christ, and those who remain in him. Here we're at the very touchstone and life of real and compelling Christianity.

Christianity consists in a vital, living, dynamic union with Jesus Christ. Without participation in the life of Christ for anyone or Christianity, without participation in the life of Jesus Christ, Christianity is dead wood.
Listen to what Calvin said about this in the third book of his Institutes. I quote him, if we want to benefit by the blessings that Christ has won for us, we have therefore to unite ourselves as closely as possible with Christ.
he must become ours and dwell in us. Nothing that he possesses belongs to us until we have been made one with him. This union of Christ is then, says Calvin, the indispensable condition for our access to the spiritual life.
It is by faith then that we enter into the indispensable communion with Christ. And, you know, becoming a Christian, I'm not really knocking this, there's far more to it than signing a decision card.
[19:14] And becoming a Christian, it's certainly far more to it than having an intellectual understanding of Christianity or a philosophical grasp of it or even a theological grasp.

Becoming a Christian is being in the vine, being in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, drawing from his life to ourselves.
For the time that remains, I just want to say three other things about authentic Christianity bringing out those three things from the words about the branches and the vine.
The first thing is redeemed disciples. Now, I want you to have in the back of your mind, if you like, the statement at the end of verse 8, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.
Have that in the back of your mind. Hold that there just now. But I want you to look at verse 3. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.
[20:36] Jesus is addressing his disciples here, and he's saying to them, you are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

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And bear in mind that this word clean is the same word as purge. Remember, I quoted already John 1 1 in the beginning was the word.
These are not dead words. This is the living word. This is the powerful word. This is the word that is redemptive. And because Jesus is the word of God, and because his words are life eternal, these words that he has spoken to his disciples have cleansed them already.
And he's cleansed them for fruit bearing. And he also adds showing yourselves to be my disciples. Discipling isn't something that is over against orderly Christianity.
Discipling is what it is to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be a disciple. Go forth and make disciples of all people.
[22:10] Secondly, remaining remaining, remaining, the key verb in this passage, it's used eleven times.

In these verses one to seventeen, this concept, this idea of remaining, remain in me, is used eleven times.
It means stay. Don't move away from this dynamic relationship.
Whatever you do, don't move away. here is the secret of Christianity, indeed the secret of the meaning of life.
Being in union with Christ and staying there, how can we do it? by remaining in his word.
[23:25] He uses the concept of the word again in verse seven. If you remain in me, this is like an if-then statement. If x, then y.

if you remain in me, if you abide in me, if you stay in me, if you stay in that relationship with me, drawing from my life, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
I'll come to that other part of it, but I just want you to notice, my words remain in you. How critical, this is what I want to emphasize, are the words of Jesus Christ.
Jesus Christ said, teaching them, I think at the end of Matthew's gospel was to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.
If the church drifts away from the person of Christ, from Christ as the vine, from the emphasis of Christ, from the teachings of Christ, because he that has seen me have seen the father.
[24:47] If the church drifts away from that, it's drifting away from authentic Christianity. he said in verse nine, remain in my love.

As the father has loved me, so have I loved you now. Remain in my love. So this remaining and remaining in this dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ entails remaining in the love of Jesus.
In other words, it entails loving one another as the family of God. It entails what Colin mentioned last week, loving your enemy.
And the not remaining is not worth thinking about. I'm not going to try and grapple with it and suggest what it might mean or might not mean.
I could do it, but I'm not doing it. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. And then later on he says, if you don't remain in me, you're like a branch thrown away and withers.
[26:11] Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. So, redeemed disciples, remaining and abiding, these are the characteristics of authentic Christianity and finally, fruit bearing.

Jesus mentions eight times in this passage about bearing fruit. Now, in verse 16, Jesus said this, you did not choose me, but I chose you, and here are the words that I want you to take note of, and appointed you, so that you might go and bear fruit.
Fruit that will last. This is not extraordinary, this is normal Christianity. He's even appointed us to go forth and bear fruit, fruit that will last.
That's part of the mission statement. And secondly, notice that fruit bearing is to our Father's glory. This is to my Father's glory, verse 8, that you bear much fruit.
fruit. And thirdly, in verse 5, I am the vine, you are the branches, if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.
[27:47] In other words, it's a legitimate expectation. And next, I said hold that about the discipleship, showing yourselves to my disciples, bearing much fruit, is one of the ways that you will show ourselves to be the true disciples of Jesus Christ.

I don't want to either get involved in esoteric talks about what the pruning involves, except to say this, no doubt pruning means that there are obstacles in our lives which are hampering fruit-bearing

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and that God wants to address those obstacles in all of our lives.
By the way, this sermon I preach first and foremost to myself, and God wants to address those things. There could be anything.
it could be that we're too much into our career. It could be that we're too much into our roots are too much down here in earth's kingdom rather than the kingdom of God.
God I don't want to go and elaborate on that at all. But I do want to finish with this. What do some of those fruits look like that Jesus is speaking about here when he says that you'll bear much fruit and that fruit-bearing is just normal for authentic Christianity?
[29:44] well obviously faith. But remember what I was been trying to say earlier on I think this is very very important.

Faith is the best way for me trying to get this across. Faith is your whole being in trusting Jesus. It's throwing your whole lot in with him.
if you wanted to put it it's not a good way to put it it's gambling your destiny your happiness the meaning of life everything like that on him.
What am I trying to say? It's miles more than an intellectual proposition understood. Faith that love remain in my love.
How difficult that is because probably to some extent anyway we love ourselves first. And in a sense there's that's not necessarily wrong.
[31:03] Remember love your neighbour as yourself. But anything that is good and proper we have a duty of care to ourselves we should love ourselves but that can become an idol.

Hope endurance humility peace joy kindness in a word we could go through all these and elaborate on them Christ likeness grace we are to belittle Christ coming from that dynamic relationship emitting the grace of Christ the love of Christ and the attraction of Christ I close by saying this I use a kind of hackneyed phrase certainly in healthcare it's been used a lot in recent years I mean last 25 years maybe it's person centred Christianity we want not program centred Christianity
I mean person centred Jesus said I am the vine it's relational Christianity we want not rationalistic propositional Christianity that's got it all in the head and nowhere else it is fruitful Christianity that we want because we do not want do we for the Lord himself to be judging us because there's no fruit there we do not need a spiritual life support machine but we do need the life of Christ to be in our beings if we are to have authentic Christianity we need to remain in him and stay there and continue there
Christ and that relationship with him in the vine is indispensable I submit to authentic to authentic Christianity may the Lord bless these thoughts to us for his own glory and for our eternal good Amen is we here the Lord bless you is here is is what is what interest

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