

# I Am the True Vine

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Date: 07 March 2004

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of March 2004 the preacher is Carol Elpherson her sermon is entitled I Am the True Vine and is based on John chapter 15 verses 1 to 17 As we come to God's word let's just pray Dear God we thank you so much for your word would you please give us understanding so that we may love you and each other more Amen For the past couple of weeks we've been looking at some of Jesus' I Am sayings found in John's Gospel sayings such as I am the bread of life I am the light of the world In making these and other statements such as

I am the good shepherd I am the way, the truth and the life Jesus is making a special and explicit claim about who he is When God discloses himself to Abraham in Genesis he says I am El Shaddai meaning God all powerful To Israel God states I am the Lord and there is no other At the burning bush God introduces himself to Moses with the words I am the God of your father the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob When Moses asks God for his name he answers I am who I am By using the I am statements Jesus is stating clearly that he is not simply God's representative not God's spokesperson He is saying that he is the presence of God in the world He is God incarnate the revelation Jesus is applying the divine name of God and therefore the authority of God to himself In this morning's passage in John 15 which can be found on page 878 if you wanted to follow along Jesus says I am the true vine Now Jesus is using an image here that was very dear to the people of Israel They identified with it very closely and in a sort of a way it is a bit like when Australia won the America's Cup back in the late 80s we identified with the image of the boxing kangaroo on that flag This image was very close to the people of Israel it represented their special status as God's chosen people a people chosen, planted and cultivated for his delight and for the fruit of faithfulness that they were expected to bear

The vine symbolises Israel as a nation and its inheritance of the land even some of their coins had a vine stamped on them The Jewish historian Josephus tells us of a gigantic gold grapevine that was situated above the curtain of the holy place in the temple in that time and wealthy citizens would bring along tendrils or gold grapes or gold leaves and these could be added onto this grapevine by the metal workers in the temple and year after year this grapevine grew bigger and bigger and Josephus says that a grape cluster alone was the size of a man But Israel's image of themselves as God's vine is not consistent with the way that God saw them Most of the references in the Bible to the vine and Israel include the theme of judgment against Israel

You see, the vine was not fruitful It was not doing what it had been planted to do A vine in agricultural societies such as 1st century Palestine was planted to produce fruit Unlike in our own gardens where we may plant a grapevine to grow up along along a trellis over a vergola to provide some shade and some beauty in autumn But often we don't want the fruit Often we don't want the messiness of the fruit falling on our verandas or pathways And so ornamental grapevines have been cultivated which actually don't produce fruit So you get the leaves but no fruit Well that's of no use to the people in the 1st century The only reason they planted a vine that a vine was ever planted was to produce fruit It wasn't meant to be multi-purposed An unfruitful vine was useless And even the wood of a vine of a grapevine couldn't be used for anything else

[ 5 : 1 0 ] As the prophet Ezekiel says in chapter 15 of Ezekiel He says The word of the Lord came to me O mortal How does the wood of the vine surpass all other wood The vine branch that is among the trees of the forest Is wood taken from it to make anything Does one take a peg from it on which to hang any object It is put in the fire for fuel When the fire has consumed both ends and the middle of it is charred Is it useful for anything When it was whole it was used for nothing How much less when the fire has consumed it and it is charred can it be used for anything An unfruitful vine unfruitful with the wood can't be used for anything Ezekiel is saying The people of Israel had been

formed to be God's people living in a covenantal relationship of faithfulness to him But Israel had been repeatedly unfaithful breaking that relationship becoming disconnected from God

Therefore the Old Testament images of the vine are associated between the contrast between God's ideal for his people on one hand and their falling short of it on the other Before his judgment on them and their exile to Babylon God sent prophets such as Ezekiel Jeremiah Isaiah to warn people and to draw them back to him in repentance and faith Prophet Isaiah was sent with these words and now inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah judged between me and my vineyard What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it When I expected it to yield grapes why did it yield wild grapes And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured

I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down I will make it a waste it shall not be pruned or hoed and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it Well against such a background Jesus' final I am saying in John's gospel is very dramatic Jesus is the real vine and he is what Israel failed to be Like day and night God's perfect faithfulness or Jesus' perfect faithfulness contrasts with Israel's unfaithfulness The degenerate fruitless vine has been replaced by the true vine God's people will no longer be contained in a vineyard a particular holding of land With the coming of Jesus the Son of God God's people will sprout as fruitful branches from him alone

The Father is the vine grower in verse 1 intimately associated with his vine and cutting away unfruitful branches This cutting down of dead branches is seen elsewhere In Matthew's gospel Jesus warns his disciples that every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire So too John the Baptist in preparing the people for Jesus' coming called on the religious leaders of the day to bear fruit in keeping with repentance warning them of coming judgment with the words the axe the axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire in verse 2 Jesus says that every branch that does bear fruit the Father will prune so that it bears more fruit and the Greek word for pruned or trimmed here is closely related to the word clean found in the next verse

Jesus says you have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you it seems there is a connection between being pruned and being cleansed whilst believers are cleansed once and for all by Jesus' death and resurrection there is also an understanding in the Bible that believers lives are being changed conforming more and more to the image of Christ being sanctified the Christian life is not meant to stand still not meant to be idle pruning happens to vines to improve their yield and so too God grows his people through the circumstances of life and this is often in the form of trials and difficulties Paul says in Romans we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance perseverance character and character hope and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy

[ 10 : 21 ] Spirit whom he has given us it's helpful I think when we find ourselves going through difficulties and trials in life to remember to ask God to help you to grow in godliness during these times stay close to him in prayer and bible reading fellowship with other Christians and in sharing the Lord's supper together don't let it be a time when we fall into the temptation to neglect meeting with others to neglect your relationship with God don't let it be a time when you drift away in this passage Jesus' time on earth with his disciples is growing short he's shared his last meal with them in two chapters further back and washed their feet giving the disciples an example of godly leadership he's foretold of his betrayal and his coming death and promised to send them the holy spirit there's only a few short hours left before his arrest and so he's wanting the disciples to really understand to abide with him the connection to him is going to be changed for the past three years they've lived with him talked eaten shared so much time and continually been in his presence but this physical presence will change with his death and resurrection and it will now become a spiritual connection Jesus stresses the need to abide in him the word means to remain to continue to stay with to hold steadfast to and in the first ten verses it's repeated eleven times emphasising the importance of this message to continue to be fruitful disciples abiding in Jesus is crucial Jesus promises that if they abide in him he will abide in them and the two cannot be separated it's impossible to be a disciple of Jesus without that connection the Christian life is a togetherness with Jesus one summer I noticed a beautiful pink vine growing up over our backyard I hadn't planted it we have a lane at our backyard so I don't quite know where it came from but it started to grow and it got bigger and bigger as the years went by and it had a prolific pink flower that used to come and it was

very lovely and one day i decided i picked the branches and put them in some vases inside and i did this and it looked rather stunning not really being a great floral arranger i was very pleased with this arrangement the next morning to my great surprise when i got up and went in to admire these beautiful flowers they were all dead the petals had fallen off all over the place the leaves were all withered i checked the water and no there was still plenty of water in these vases but this particular vine was obviously not meant to be picked and put into vases because when it had been separated from the vine from the sap it died to fail to abide or remain in christ risks separation from god those who are in christ jesus can have confidence of their salvation because they are part of the vine whilst connected to jesus they can never die or wither his life pumps through them as a sap through vine so that even when believers are feeling weak and feeling limp we can know that we're never left alone as paul in 2 corinthians says when i am weak then i am strong but what about the branches that are cut off as described in verses 2 and 6 they can raise questions such as can a christian lose their salvation can christians be fruitless and i think

to answer this we need to understand what is meant by the term of fruit in this passage it's in the context more in the terms of godliness the fruit of the spirit such as love joy peace patience kindness etc as found in galatians the development of the christian character than say the fruit of mission although this will often be a follow on from that means that people may attend church regularly they may listen to sermons and participate in church activities having an external involvement in church life but with no inward movement they fail to be changed fail to live a life of love and grace their christianity is nominal in the words of jesus in the book of revelation the warning is i know your works you have a name for being alive but you are dead wake up failure to grow in godly character through repentance faith in jesus christ and holiness of life will result in these branches being cut off and thrown into the eternal fire there is no such thing as a dormant believer those lacking in spiritual fruit are dead even when they are alive abiding in jesus is to remain in his word in verse seven now debbie and bob watson who are two members of our ten o'clock congregation here are members of the missionary adventures organization and they've just returned from visiting missionaries around the world and they've given me their permission to share this they said that in meeting with countries and christians from all around the world in particular two countries and the christian leaders that they met there impacted on them the most and these were members of the persecuted churches in china and vietnam and as they met with church leaders and the pastors they asked them how their organization could help them how they could best support them what could they do what were their needs mind you even meeting with debbie and bob in some situations risked imprisonment and loss of all personal belongings for their relatives for their family but overwhelmingly these people stated that their needs were for more bibles and more teaching aids they were not seeking land or buildings or other material goods what they wanted was to be able to abide in the word of god and to be able to teach others to do so they had a hunger for god's word and for a hunger to lead others to christ abiding in jesus as the word made flesh means keeping close to god's word found in the bible and this will lead to prayers that are within his will the prayers of all who truly abide in jesus christ will be asking for those things that are in accordance with god's will in verse 8 jesus says that the disciples will glorify god by bearing much fruit and by doing this you become jesus' disciples now it's interesting here that he says you'll become my disciples when we know he's already speaking to disciples but there's a text note in the nrsv that says become could also mean be and it's a sense of discipleship as being dynamic growing and bearing fruit as the disciples continue to abide in jesus they will continue to become more fully jesus' disciples living a life of love and obedience results in a life of joy it's a joy of a fruitful and purposeful life one of creativity and productivity a life lived in jesus christ to do the good works that god has prepared in advance for his people to do jesus calls his disciples friends i don't know about you but i don't really have any friends in very high prestigious positions i don't know steve bratz or john howard or any world leaders but jesus says his disciples are his friends and i think that's a great privilege to know not only jesus as our lord and saviour but to know him as his as our friend one who knows us intimately one we can call on at any time day or night one that we can share the good times and the difficult times one we can seek help and guidance from at all times in the tabernacle in the book of exodus the lord spoke to moses as a person speaks with a friend this is the friendship that jesus is offering to those who follow him he reminds his followers that they did not choose him but he chose them following jesus obeying his command to love one another is a requisite of this of this friendship the disciples are called to love

one another as Jesus has loved them this is the highest standard of love because Jesus laid down his life for his friends his call to self-sacrificial love is a call to all Christians it's a call for an examination of our attitudes to fellow other Christians to see where there's condemning selfish or proud attitude and to repent of this to see where there's a desire to dominate or to assert superiority towards others it's a reminder that though we may have knowledge of sound theological doctrines if we lack love for one another it gains us nothing it's a reminder that though we may have faith to move all mountains but have not love we are nothing Jesus says we are to love one another and it's probably the biggest challenge to Christians to love not only those we know and love not only our friends but to others to love other Christians who may have differences of opinions to us well recently on holidays in Port Douglas Peter and I went scuba diving neither of us had ever done this before we were given instructions that lasted almost an hour the crucial thing of course was in learning how to breathe correctly so that we got the air that was in the tank on our backs through the air the air hoses and into our lungs once we had all the diving equipment on we had to sit on the edge of the boat and practice our breathing and then again when we just jumped into the into the water surface of the water before we could fully submerge we had to demonstrate competence in taking out the mouthpiece and then putting it back in again in case it got knocked out when we were down underwater because being attached to the air supply was critical but in breathing properly and being well attached to it we were able to enter a world that was like unlike anything else that I'd ever been in it was magnificent to be able to touch the ocean floor to swim amongst the brightly colored reef fish to swim beside the coral to go under rocky ledges and even into caves it was a truly stunning experience God's kingdom is unlike anything else as air tanks enable divers to experience the underwater world abiding in Jesus enables believers to remain in God's kingdom there we enter a rain that brings joy love friendship fruitfulness Jesus says God's kingdom has one vine attachment to God comes through the attachment to Jesus alone amen ■ o amen you we are lovely tou me