

Sunday 5th May 2024 - Jesus, The True Vine

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Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

[0 : 00] So today's sermon is a bit of a strange one in that it's a completely standalone thing because next week we begin our exciting new series which Matt has planned about the Holy Spirit. But today we're talking, last week Matt talked about the sower and things that can get in the way of that deep love and understanding of the grace of God. And today we're kind of continuing the agricultural theme. We're going to talk about vines. Now I am not a good gardener. I see in the house we have got some people who are very good gardeners. So the things I'm going to tell you about vines which I have discovered primarily from Google, I would suggest that you check them up with some of the experts afterwards. But we're going to be talking about vines. It's going to follow on a bit from some of the ideas we had in the Lent course where were a lot of features of vines. We saw the true vine, the image of vines on the Ark of the Covenant. And the section we're going to be looking at today comes from one of Jesus's goodbye speeches, this time from the Gospel of John. And when you look at these passages, they're kind of designed to be comforting. They're the passages that Jesus leaves us with just before he gets arrested. Now I think they're designed to be comforting, but some of it doesn't always translate into modern context. So when you take them as little snippets, you can read them and think, that's terrifying. But I think when you look at them as a whole, what Jesus is trying to say is, my love's going to live on. It's going to be okay. Just hang around and abide in me. And I promise you that it's going to be fine. It's designed to give the disciples a message to hang on through the troubling times that are going to come across. And they seem quite anxious in some ways, partly because of the context which they come from, because there will have been this sense of great fear around at the time. Jesus has come into Jerusalem. There was this huge crowd that walked him in on Palm Sunday, and they seemed so cheerful and so happy. But the simplicity that Jesus didn't offer them, he didn't offer them an easy solution, he didn't offer them a violent resistance to the Roman Empire. So those crowds are beginning to get dissatisfied. They're being whipped up by corrupt religious authorities. And the whole of the mechanism of the Roman state is starting to turn towards Jesus and say, look at this man. This man might be a threat. Perhaps we should do something to take him out. And there's no way the disciples won't have known that. They'll have been in this atmosphere where they can feel like something bad is going to happen. So Jesus is kind of talking in that context. And in that context, what he gives is a message ultimately of love, of God's love for them, of how they should love other people. And to do that in the context of all of that fear, I just think that's a very important thing. And I think that's a very important thing. And I think that's a very important thing to do is to say, I think, is really extraordinary. So I've told you about the passage, but now you actually get to see it for yourselves. So that might help. I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. While every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful. [3 : 28] You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands, and remain in his love.

[5 : 03] I have told you this, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, and so that whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you.

This is my command. Love each other. So, a really beautiful final rousing speech to the disciples, which kind of uses this metaphor of the fruit, and ultimately is a message about love.

It's one of several messages about love, and about how Jesus has drawn close to the world, which Jesus uses in John 13 to 17, where Jesus is trying to explain how much God has loved the world, and what it means for God and the Holy Spirit to come and live in the world, as a tabernacle, and this time as a vine of which we're the branches.

[7 : 02] So, we're going to think a bit about vines, but I thought I would give you this image, which I think sums it up, really. It's an image which kind of references the abide in me as I abide in you.

So, you can kind of see God the Father, not really because it's the wrong shape, but God the Father is drawing Jesus close with arms in the sky. And then Jesus is drawing a person, perhaps designed to be you or me close, and inside you or me, there is the Holy Spirit drawing close, a kind of circle of love and affections.

But the way that Jesus is trying to explain the love this time is about vines. So, we're going to talk about vines. Jesus says, I am the vine and my Father is the gardener.

And we have this picture of God as this very careful gardener. Not just any gardener, but a divine gardener. It's the same picture we have at the very start of the Bible in Genesis.

A divine gardener who looks after the vines very carefully, ensuring every single little tendril of new growth is attached to the frame.

[8 : 16] And the gardener knows what is necessary to bring the best out of each plant. It's not going to plant plants and just leave them to wither. So, pruning to bring more fruit.

Pruning might sound terrifying, but I don't think it is intended to be. It's just meant to be careful love and attention. Watering and picking the ripe fruit before it rots on the vine, overcoming the plant.

So, I guess when we see that God is referred to as a gardener, then God won't just be any old gardener. And when we see God pruning the plant, God will never cut back unnecessarily.

Now, vines are really interesting plants because they don't just stay green all the time. They have a dormant season where they look like they're dead, like these ones look like they're dead. They dry and become brittle.

And it looks like they aren't going to bear fruit. But God is a gifted and patient gardener. So, he would look at these plants and he wouldn't think those are dead plants. Instead, he would think those are dormant plants.

[9 : 20] And he'd know how to wait or how to bring the vines out of their dormant period so they could go back to bearing fruit. God wouldn't just throw away vines like these, even if they look dead.

He would lovingly tend them back into a state of green health. And I think this is a really important message, isn't it? Because sometimes we listen to passages like these where it says, Abide in me and you'll bear fruit.

And you might think, well, I don't necessarily feel like I'm bearing any fruit right now. I feel like I might be dry and brittle. And then the passage like this might not be a passage of love, but a passage of fear.

But it's important to think deeply about the metaphor. Even if you're going through a dry and dormant passage, we are promised, Abide in God and we will provide fruit that will last, even if we can't see it right now.

So, I guess when Jesus talks about vines and invites people to abide in him, the image he's picking out is one of new branches of vines being grafted to established roots.

[10 : 32] Now, grafting is, I understand, where you've got an older, really big plant, or a plant that's got a good root stock, and you kind of attach a new plant to the top, and they kind of grow together into a seamless whole.

Some of the gardeners in the congregation are going to come and correct me afterwards, I'm sure. Now, old vines develop really deep roots, often three metres deep. In the right conditions, they can be up to 30 metres deep, at least according to Google.

And grafting is where you attach a plant, so it's part of the same plant, so it will draw on it. So, when we have the dormancy period, what actually happens when the vines die back is all of the sap that makes them green kind of goes back into the roots.

And if we imagine Jesus as the roots, then what's happening when it feels like you're dry or dormant is that you are kind of sliding back into Christ, pulling back a bit from the world to rest in the arms of God.

Equally, when the vine is producing grapefruit, we can see that it's the sap from the roots, it's water that Christ has drawn that makes the fruit pop.

[11:43] So, it's all about that deep relationship of being. So, the vine is this very deep metaphor, but ultimately it's a metaphor that you can rely on God.

God will provide you with what you need. God will hold you when things seem too much. And God will give you the means to make fruit that will last, even if you can't see it right now.

But that's not the only way in which a vine is a rich metaphor. The other thing about vines, which I learned from the very wise Linda Hood, is that vines are an unusual kind of plant.

Because when the fruit gets ripe, if it isn't picked, then the grapes will rot on the vine. So, they have to be picked. They have to be eaten. They have to be shared or they'll take the plant down.

So, with a vine, you have to use the grapes. You have to pick them. Perhaps, if you haven't got a way of storing loads of grapes in the heat of the Middle East, you have to make wine with them.

[12:42] Because otherwise, you're going to have all of this fruit that will rot. And you should share it. So, this is ultimately a picture of love that will not be kept selfishly to yourself.

You can't hold the love of God captive. But it's also really interesting to then say you'll produce fruit that will last, when grapes are like the fruit that doesn't last at all.

Even if you leave them on the plant, they won't last. Let alone the ones that you might take home.

So, what is all of this about? I think this is all about how God's love works and acts on earth.

About how God offers to fill us with the Holy Spirit. And how we can trust God to tend to us. To put it in situations where we'll bear fruit.

To reassure us and renew us when we feel dormant and incapable of anything. Because ultimately, God knows better. And when we do bear fruit, we can trust that God, the gardener, will see that that fruit is picked and shared.

[13:46] Shared abundantly. Which is what we see with Christ. Who offered his arms open wide enough to welcome the whole world. But he keeps mentioning the fruit.

So, what about the fruit? And how will it last? So, I guess when Jesus says, Abide in me, I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit.

I guess to understand this, we need to go back into the situation that Jesus was talking to. So, you see him talking to the disciples before he was being taken away.

But on this final night, Jesus is preparing all of his disciples for the time he won't be physically with them. Abide, he says. Abide, he says. West. Wait with me.

Stay in my love. Continue with me. Endure. Be present. This was Jesus' chance to say, When I'm gone, don't forget to do this, this and this.

[14:42] But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't give them a scary to-do list. Instead, he says, Wait. Rest in me. Be present in my love. What is, I guess, a bit like with the Martha and Mary situation.

Of course, the disciples have lots of other ideas. There seems like there is so much to be done. And I'm sure all of us can identify that. We always experience great challenge when just asked to sit at Jesus' feet.

We'd rather go out and work hard and see evidence that we're doing well, nicely fruit in numbers, fruit in money perhaps, fruit in really good prayers that feel really spiritually great.

We think maybe we've got some spare time. We should take on a new spiritual discipline or commit to soup kitchens or planting trees or visiting those in hospital or finally getting serious about prayer.

But that's not what Jesus is asking on this last night. Jesus knew we were having other ideas. So he said, You're just going to have to rest. You're just going to have to rest in me.

[15 : 50] Not because the kingdom of God is finished and the world is perfect. Not because everyone already knows the good news of Jesus. Not because there's nothing to be done.

But because sometimes you just have to stop and be held by God. Because that's what's best for your relationship with God. And if you take the time to stop and be held, then you'll find yourself able to grow.

Grow through the love of God to shine love into the world. Jesus says, That's what I'm leading to you. Abide in me. And I guess that's the real heart of the passage for me.

So what did that mean for the disciples? Jesus knew that they would struggle with it. Struggle to dwell in his love and rest in his teaching. They would have a hard time remembering what it was like to love him.

They would want to leave to run away from the situation. But by giving them this illustration, Jesus allows them to see that like the little grapes on these vines, sometimes fruit takes a long time to develop.

[16 : 56] And its ability to grow isn't in our hands. However much we feel like we could do. It's in the hands of the vine grower, who is God. So what does that mean for us?

The struggles we have with abiding are different. But the words of encouragement are still the same. No matter how tempted we may be to be busy for God, John's Jesus doesn't leave us with a to-do list.

He reminds us to rest in the love of God. He calls us to reject the idea that working really hard at prayer or constant activity gives us significance. Instead, he says, rest and depend on me.

I am the vine grower. I will cultivate you and nurture you. The branches will not bear fruit apart from the vine. And apart from the vine grower, however hard you work.

And how do we live this? How do we live as branches in a vine tended by God? How do we really accept that we're not gardeners but branches? We're not the creators or authors of our lives and ministries.

[18 : 02] We're not responsible for knowing how the whole world is going to turn out in the end. Instead, we are called just to rest in the love of God. To sit grafted to the roots of Christ.

To be held in difficult times back in the roots away from the world. Then when we are pruned to bear fruit. Fruit that will be shared beyond what we can imagine.

Because abundant love and joy which come from God always shine out, always inspire and always change people. And I think that that's something that we are quite good at in this church.

Taking time to just sit in the love of God. To offer that love in its purest form to other people. By just being with other people. Perhaps at the drop in.

Perhaps in our daily ministries. Perhaps just through listening to the music in the band. But I think that's a really important message to take forward. Just sit there. Just be there.

[19 : 01] Just love other people. Amen. And if you're writing about it. This is very powerful. Just love something. Just love the definition. Just love each other. Just love that. Just love to have faith. Just love what heaven.

Just love to have to have our skin. Just love what heaven is■■■■■■. Just love that in our hearts, not a heaven. Just love that in our heads together. Just love that when life needs to be forgiveness, not a father■■■.