

John 15: 1-17

CCC: 26th. July 2009

URC: 2nd. August 2009 also Isaiah 5: 1-7

It has been a very good year so far for fruit. Gooseberries, black currants and red currants have all done well in my garden. The branches have been laden with succulent fruit. The gooseberry branches had no room for any more fruits. At one level this is due to having the right combinations of sun and rain. It is also due to the appropriate feeding they have been given, and also to the training and pruning I have done. So the use of a vine to teach about togetherness, about community, and about fruitfulness, is one I can relate to. With the right conditions, with care and understanding, a community can produce fruit for others. An outward looking community.

Isaiah 5:7. The vineyard... is Israel – the nation. Salvation is for the nation. In John 15, Jesus gives a different image of the vine. The vine is no longer the nation, Israel, but Jesus himself. Jesus is the vine. Let's explore this imagery of the vine a little.

There is *fruitfulness* – the objective of the vine is to be fruitful. It is not about togetherness, twirling our tendrils around each other – just being a vine, just being a church, just being a cosy little family. Nothing wrong in being these things, so long as they are not all that we are; not all that is our objective. The objective is to be outward looking, the fruit is for others to eat and to live, to be healthy. Isabel and I have been picking our red and black currants. Lots of juicy and good tasting fruits, and as we know, lots of vitamin C. The bushes this year are very fruitful and we are enjoying them. The bushes are giving to us.

Dependence is in these verses. The root and main stem of the vine need the tendrils to produce fruit. The tendrils need the root and main stem to feed them. We are the tendrils. We need the bible to feed us and we need to know God's love, Jesus' love. For it is together that we produce fruit, it is together that we look outward,. Togetherness – God and us – is central to God's plan. In this we need to know that at times, we can rest in the hollow of God's hand, that we have a future and a hope. Heaven awaits us. For we are God's people, we are Jesus' friend.

This image of the vine points clearly to that *vital union*. Jesus and us! The creator of the universe, the creator of the world and all that's on it, the creator of mankind – needs you, and he needs me! Why? Because he chose to do it this way. He has chosen you – each of one of you. He calls you by name – he calls you his friend.

Jesus will change your name
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid.

Jesus will change your name
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one;
Faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks his face.

The first half of our reading, John 15: 1-8 is about being part of, *remaining*, in the vine. The second part, verses 9-16 are about *remaining* in Jesus' love. Both sections give *fruitfulness* as the goal, and both tie this fruitfulness to pray – ask.

But, be warned! There is also pruning! Throughout the bible, we read of prophets sent to warn the people – us! – to mend their ways, to repent. Here we have an even stronger statement. Verse 6. *If anyone does not remain in me, he is like the branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.* That is judgement, that is final.

So, Jesus is the vine and we are inextricably linked to him as a friend, and as a fellow worker. It is the whole vine, the roots, the stem, and the branches that *together* produce the fruit. The stem feeds the branches, and the branches produce the fruit.

What then is this fruit and who is it for?

In Luke chapter 9, Jesus gathered his twelve disciples together and *sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.* After this Jesus appointed 72 others and sent them out two by two. *Heal the sick and tell them the kingdom of God is at hand.*

I like this command, nice and simple – tell of the kingdom of God, heal the sick. Healing the sick I interpret as doing good works. Whatever gifts God has given us then we should use for him and for all his people. Some of us are carers, busy doing things, some are good at listening, some for keeping the accounts or clearing the drains. It is not just about waiting for someone to break their leg. The vine does not wait for people to be hungry before it produces fruit. We must be aware that Jesus said heal the sick AND tell of the kingdom. It was not an either or – it was a clear AND. We have to do both. Otherwise the pruning shears will bear us off to the fire!

Verse 9. *As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love.*

What is this love? I love my garden; I love to look out of the window and down the slope. Summer with the leaves, winter with the branches allowing views of far away hills. I love north Hampshire, equal to the Vale of Ffestiniog and the Moelwyns.

I love my dressing gown, its warm and snugly and I have had it for many years.

My friend Dave comes over every month or two and we love to talk about narrow gauge railways and watch a railway DVD.

I love my wife Isabel, our children and our grandchild. Lots of love!

English often has at least two words for the same idea, but we use the word love in many contexts. The Greeks had a number of different words which we translate as love. Greek is the language the New Testament was written in, so we need sometimes to refer to the original to help our understanding.

There is *Eros* – erotic love. Nothing wrong with this, it is God given, but this is not the love that Jesus is talking about.

Then there is *Storgae* – familiar love. My love of my dressing gown is *storgae* love.

Philia is having a common interest. My friend and I loving to talk of railways.

The word used in scripture is almost always *agape*. This is the word used in John 15. *Agape* love. *Agape* is almost exclusively used in Christian literature. Breaking bread – communion – was known as the *Agape* – the love meal. Some Christian groups today have *agape* meals.

Agape measures itself by sacrifice. *Agape* is sacrificial love.

Agape is a selfless love, a love that is passionately committed to the well-being of the other.

1 John 4:8 says *God is love*. The word used here is *agape*.

John 3:16 *God so loved the world that he sent his only son...* Probably the best known scripture, the word for love used here is *agape*.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment he replied: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: love your neighbour as yourself.* Matthew 22: 37-39

Jesus uses the word *agape* here. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Again he uses the word *agape*.

Agape - a love that is passionately committed to the well-being of the other. That is God's love for us. God's love for you, God's love for me. Wonderful!

Errrrrrrrrrrr! What about this loving our neighbour, AND what about loving our enemies? Not only do we have to heal the sick, which includes our enemies, BUT we have to love them passionately as well. That's a bit thick!

We can ask for anything of God and he will grant it, BUT, we have to be in him; we have to be part of the vine; we have to live in him and Jesus live in us.

Agape love - a love that is passionately committed to the well-being of the other.

How can we take hold of this love; how can we live it; how can we be in Jesus and Jesus in us? Prayer and scripture reminds us of our connectivity with Jesus and it reinforces our commitment. A daily reading of scripture, with a meditation on it really helps. Daily scripture reading books help us in this – I would strongly recommend you look at the ones available and choose one that suits you.

I want to offer a complementary prayer for you to use. A daily prayer – like a mantra. Ideally it is used first thing in the morning when we wake – to set us up; to connect us to Jesus. It can be used as we walk, it can even be used – or part of it – as an arrow prayer in difficult situations. I have used it as such and found it helpful in diffusing situations. Of course, I also know of those situations when it would have been useful for me to pray it!

In John 15:9-16, Jesus affirms his love for us. It is important therefore that we hold on to that – the very reality of it should help us to have healthy, cheerful minds. And with healthy minds comes healthy bodies – we have less stress in our lives, we exude a happiness to others. People react to one another; a happy confident person is more agreeable than one who is always finding fault and moaning.

Affirmation 1 then is: *God loves me*, NOT as we know he would want us to be, but as we are now. So, if he loves me, then I should also love myself! Not narcissistic love, but being aware of our warts. Putting these two together we have: *God loves me, AND I love myself as I am unconditionally.*

Jesus chose his disciples – he calls them friends. Jesus chose you, he chose me. Sometimes we don't like ourselves that much and we devalue ourselves. We also devalue others by destructive criticism. The Jews of Jesus day did not have much regard for the Samaritans – second class citizens. Jesus told a parable of a Samaritan – the second class citizen who was the only one to help. He also spoke to a Samaritan woman – a Samaritan woman who probably was not liked much by her own people. She went to the well on her own and in the middle of the day. We have Jesus giving us examples of loving our neighbour, possibly even loving our enemies.

So, because Jesus chose us, *we should never devalue ourselves*. Because we should love our enemies, *we should never devalue others*. Putting these two together we have affirmation 2: *I never devalue myself, or others, by destructive criticism.*

I only wish I could live these affirmations – all the time. There are people I dislike, there times when I dislike myself; I do rebel against God's directions; I do not always want to do his will – I want to do mine. Certainly the warning that I could be cut off, thrown into a fire, is a caution to me. But God's

love for me, his choosing me, Jesus being my friend, Jesus always by my side, wanting to be even closer – being a real part of me. This love is what draws me.

The affirmations are:

1. God loves me, and I love myself as I am - unconditionally.
2. I never devalue myself, or others, by destructive criticism.

If we say these affirmations at the start of each day, then we start to live them throughout the day. And so we start to obey Jesus' final command in today's scripture reading – verse 17.

This is my command: love each other.