

Sermon: Sunday 2nd May 2021 All Around the Altar Service. John 15:1-8

This is Jesus's last 'I Am' saying as recorded in the book of John

Jesus has said that he is:

the bread of life, in John 6, 'whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never get thirsty.'

Jesus said I AM The light of the world in John 8 – 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

Jesus said I am 'The Gate' in John 10 - 'whoever enters through me will be saved'.

And he said I AM The good shepherd later in the same chapter – as we heard from Brian last week.

Jesus said I AM The resurrection and the life, in John 11. 'Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies.'

Jesus said I am 'the way, the truth and the life' in John 14 – 'No one comes to the Father except through me.' Why? Because, as he says later, I and the Father are one. Jesus is God, Jesus is the great I AM.

When Moses asked God at the burning bush in Exodus 3 who shall I say you are? God said I AM – and here in John, Jesus is saying he is the great I AM.

Jesus and God are one and as we shall see are one also with the Spirit.

So, if we have read through the book of John, we are getting used to Jesus' teaching, reminding us of his divinity.

Here, in John 15, he says I AM the vine. Well actually he says I am the true vine.

What does Jesus mean by saying he is the TRUE vine? If we look into the Old Testament, then there are frequent references to the vineyard. And vineyards are a metaphor for Israel.

Let me take you back to an ancient book in the bible. The book of Isaiah.

Isaiah Ch 5 says this:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Those who would have first listened to the reading we have had from the book of John would have known that Isaiah reference.

God did everything for his chosen people, he tended them, it says he took out all the hard rocks, he made the way to God easy and straight. They became a nation. But what did they do?

Let's read on in Isaiah

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

"Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?

When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

What did Israel do? They messed up time and time again.

And now, as recorded in the book of John, Jesus said I am the TRUE vine, not just any vine but the true vine. Jesus will enable the vineyard to produce the fruit that was actually meant to be produced. God is going to produce the good fruit that he always wanted to produce and he is going to produce it through you and me as we are attached to the true vine, Jesus. And we know that although God came first to the Jews he is now speaking to all people. Jesus will help all of us. Jesus came so that we can all produce good fruit. If we stay with Jesus he will produce good fruit through us.

So far, so good. Then we come to verse 2 - which says 'Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he... what does the NIV say? - he cuts off - other translations of this verse says 'he takes away'. I've always found this verse quite uncomfortable. Every branch IN ME - in other-words, it suggests that every believer that doesn't bear fruit will be cut off or taken away. That just doesn't sound quite right. We've already heard in John 11 that whoever believes in Jesus will NEVER die. And Romans 8:32 says 'Nothing can separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus'. So, is the Bible wrong here? If the Bible is God-breathed - then there are no errors, no contradictions. The Bible is always true. So how can this be explained?

Well, a really strange thing happened to me as I was grappling with this verse. I started typing my thoughts and as I did, I looked up at the screen and what was there was in Greek, not English. I have no idea how that happened. It was very peculiar. So, I thought I should look into this further. I looked at the Greek in verse 2 and what I found was remarkable.

The word 'cut off', or 'take away' is, in Greek, the word 'airo' - no, not the chocolate bar! This same word is used in Matthew 4 v6 to mean bear you up, or in Matthew 9:6 pick up your bed. Matthew 16 - Jesus airo'd his cross. This word, Airo, can also be translated - lifted up.... This completely changes the sense of this passage.

I decided to look up how vines were grown in ancient times - and they weren't like the tree like structure that we see today but they just grew along the ground.

So, this parable suggests that those who were 'in Christ' but were not bearing fruit were like the vines that were growing along the ground and were not doing so well, perhaps because they were waterlogged or trampled on.

Perhaps Jesus is saying here that those who know Jesus but are struggling, will be 'lifted up' or 'raised up'. You see vines that weren't flourishing on the ground were indeed raised and put on rocks or trellises. Jesus cares for those who are struggling - he doesn't throw them away! Now that makes more sense. That reflects the Jesus I know.

But then, what about the second half of verse 2 ...Every branch that does bear fruit - he prunes.....ouch....

What does this mean? Even if you are growing in Jesus, even if you are developing as a disciple, Jesus still prunes... The Greek for prunes is prunes - there's no getting away from this one!

I'm no gardener, but I was thinking of a plant called a Buddleia that we had at our previous house. If we cut back the Buddleia at the end of each year, then the next year it would go completely bananas and put on an amazing amount of growth and produced some spectacular flowers. If we forgot and just left it, it would get hard and woody and the flowering was nowhere near as impressive. Cutting out old growth can really reinvigorate the plant.

It's like Jesus wants to take away old growth that inhibits us from being fruitful – old habits, old ways. Ways in which we can comfortably rest back in and know we can do without God's help.

We all need a bit of pruning every now and then!

Jesus says we need to do things in his strength, not our own. We remember the 'I can', from Philippians 4.

You see, apart from Christ we can do nothing but with him we can do all things

It is from Jesus that we grow fruit and if you do not abide in Jesus, you cannot bear fruit.

We connect to Jesus – and He produces the fruit... it's not about the struggle to be better people and the doing things that make us better – it is all about abiding or being with Jesus.

What is the fruit? It is almost certainly the fruit of the spirit - as found in Galatians 5: Love joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control and who doesn't need more of these!

Once we get onto verse 6, we see that those who don't believe in Jesus, those who reject him and his teaching, don't fare so well. But those who do believe in Jesus can ask whatever they wish. In Matthew 7 it says it even more strongly.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

Life with Jesus is amazing, not always easy as the pruning suggests, but as we abide in Him, as we spend time with Jesus – as Awesome Andy said. That's not complicated at all. We just need to talk to Him, and share what's happening in our life with Him, as we pray; and listen to Him as we read our Bible. Then we will find that as we do the things that He asks us to do, we will have more love, more joy, more peace.

So today, let us thank God for Jesus and commit to spend more time with him each day.

As we reflect on this Andrea is going to sing 'Jesus, be the centre' and perhaps you could join in as a sign that you want Jesus to be the centre of your life.