

# Sermon

Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2009

## I am the true vine

John 15:1-8

The pastor of a local church discovered that a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard and was afraid to come down. The pastor coaxed, offered warm milk, etc. The kitty would not come down. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to his car and drove away so that the tree bent down, he could then reach up and get the kitten.

He did all this, checking his progress in the car frequently, then figured if he went just a little bit further, the tree would be bent sufficiently for him to reach the kitten. But as he moved a little further forward, the rope broke. The tree went BOING and the kitten instantly sailed through the air - out of sight.

The pastor felt terrible. He walked all over the neighbourhood asking people if they'd seen a little kitten. No. Nobody had seen a stray kitten. So he prayed, "Lord, I just commit this kitten to your keeping," and went on about his business.

A few days later he was at the grocery store, and met one of his church members. He happened to look into her shopping cart and was amazed to see cat food. Now this woman was a cat hater and everyone knew it, so he asked her, "Why are you buying cat food when you hate cats so much?"

She replied, "You won't believe this," and told him how her little girl had been begging her for a cat, but she kept refusing. Then a few days before, the child had begged again, so the Mom finally told her little girl, "Well if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it."

She told the pastor, "I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees, and ask God for a cat. And really, Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her."

As funny as that story is,  
It also wonderfully illustrates the theme of today's service,  
How do we set all the things that happen to us in the context of our faith?  
How do we understand our lives every day in terms of our relationship with Jesus?

In our joint services we have been looking at the great I am saying of Jesus,  
Today we reach these words the John read for us,  
I am the true vine.

When you read the Hebrew Bible  
Which is our Old Testament  
You will see that the one of the most common images for Israel as the nation of God people,  
Is the image of vine or the vineyard

*Isaiah 5:7* "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel"  
*Jeremiah 2:21* [God says to Israel] "Yet I planted you as a choicest vine"  
*Hosea 10:1* "Israel in luxuriant vine"  
*Psalms 80:8* (Speaking the of exodus of the people under Moses) "You brought a vine out of Egypt"

I could go on but that is enough to prove the point!  
Such a powerful image was the vine that it became something of a national symbol of the nation of Israel,  
It was used on their coins,  
And the temple,  
The place where Jews believed heaven and earth touch,  
The most special and sacred building in the land,  
On the front great doors of the temple was carved a vine and rich families would donate gold, from which bunches of grapes would be carved and fitted.

So Jesus was speaking of an image that his hearers knew well.  
But what he did with that image would have shocked them.

He says that it is not Israel that is the true vine it is Christ.  
It is Christ who has completed what Israel was supposed to do,  
It is Christ who has served God,  
And followed God perfectly,  
It is Christ who is the fulfilment of all that Israel was to be.  
And so,  
Again as we saw last week when Jesus described himself as the way the truth and the life,  
What counts for relationship with God,  
Is not that people belong to a special race,  
Or a special group of people.  
It is not about whether they are part of the a church or any other organisation,  
It is not about who often they come to the temple and worship,  
Nor how often we come to church,  
There is no magic formula of action that guarantees being God's chosen people,  
Rather,  
Since Jesus is the true vine,  
What matters is our relationship with him.  
So Jesus tells his followers abide in me.

The story is told of a tradesman who attended the congregation of the great preacher F.W. Robertson in the 1850s  
At Holy Trinity church in Brighton,  
Robertson was something of a hero to the tradesman,  
And he kept a picture of the great preacher in the back room of his shop,  
Every time the tradesman was tempted to cheat someone,  
Or to do a bit of business unfairly,  
He would walk through to the back room and look at the picture,  
And remind himself of the faith he shared with Robertson.

I also read of an experiment that was conducted in Atlanta in the US.  
In this experiment a number of homeless folk,  
Were placed in homes with fairly well off folk for a period of time.  
Over the course of their time in the homes,  
Every single one of the homeless folk improved themselves,  
Their dress,  
Their appearance,  
Their self pride etc,  
All improved.

However when the experiment was over and the homeless folk were given the chance to  
brand out on their own with their new found skills,  
Almost all of them returned to the streets.  
Taken from the closeness of the family and the home and the support,  
They could not make it on their own.

Those two stories illustrate what Jesus means when he calls us to abide in him,  
He is the vine we are the branches,  
As his people we are joined to Christ,  
We share in all that he has done for us in his life and death and resurrection,  
But just as vine branches cannot survive on their own,  
They need to be joined to the vine in order to live,  
So in our lives we need to be joined to Christ.  
In practice that means making sure that in the way that we live our lives,  
In the priorities we set ourselves everyday  
Christ comes first.  
We need to order our lives,  
So that each day we can spend time with Christ,  
We can focus on him.

Jesus even gives us the example of that in his own relationship with God,  
Constantly getting away from the crowds just to spend time with God,  
As Willie Barclay says we need to be:

**“arranging our lives, arranging prayer, arranging silence in such a way that there is never  
a day when we give ourselves the chance to forget him”**

And that's where the pruning comes in.  
I don't know much about vines to be honest,  
I not even sure I have even seen one other than on television or in a book!  
But I am told that pruning vines and pruning roses is basically the same,  
Now pruning roses I do know about.  
Our manse garden is full of roses,  
And my mother-in-law has made sure I know all about pruning them!  
You need to cut off the dead flowers,  
You need at certain points to strip away some of the branches.  
I even know why!  
Left on their own the roses will grow and grow,  
Become straggly,  
They will continue to produce flowers,  
But the bigger the rose,  
The smaller and more pathetic the flowers will be,  
It is as if all the branches get in each other's way,  
The resources of the plant have to go further,  
And the flowers become stunned.

It's the same with vines,  
The vinekeeper,  
Will constantly monitor the vine,  
To make sure that best branches have most chance to grow and produce the best grapes,  
He will strip away all the other growth that might hinder the harvest.

If Christ is the most important person in our faith,  
If we are called to focus on him daily,  
And make sure he is at the centre of all we do.  
Then we have to realise that there are so many things in our lives  
That can get in the way of that relationship.

We all live busy lives,  
From little children to old age pensioners we have so much more that we can do now,  
So much more to entertain us,  
So much more we can achieve in our lives,  
And it seems that we have never been more busy with activities in our lives than in our world  
today.

There is nothing wrong with most of those activities,  
There is nothing wrong with being involved in clubs and societies,  
There is nothing wrong with working hard,  
There is nothing wrong with enjoying your free time,  
And I for one will not condemn anyone for any of those things.

But if we are so busy in our lives,  
If our time is so taken up with activity and responsibility,  
That we do not have time for our relationship with Christ,  
Or if that relationship gets crushed into a few grabbed minutes here and there throughout the  
week,  
Like the giving Jesus the dregs of our lives,  
Then we are in need of pruning!

For if you are too busy for Jesus,  
Then my friends you are too busy for life!

Sometimes that process of pruning our lives to allow Jesus to be at the centre,  
To make sure that our focus in all we do is on him and him alone,  
Means that we have to give up on perfectly good and valid other activities,  
Sometimes we have to make difficult choices  
That's the painful part of pruning,  
But if our faith is to flourish,  
If our relationship with Christ is to blossom,  
If we are to truly abide in Christ,  
That pruning must be done.

So ask yourself,  
Am I abiding in Christ?  
Is Jesus flourishing in my life,  
Do I feel close to him?  
Look at your life and examine what you give to Christ,  
Is he your first thought?  
You first thought when it comes to how you care for your family?  
Is he your first thought when it comes to your job?  
Is he your first thought when it comes to how you spend your leisure time?  
Or is Jesus crammed into your life,  
An afterthought offered a few guilty minutes every now and then?

If you give so little of yourself to him,  
Then your faith will flounder and stunt,  
It will mean little to you,  
You will one who professes without practicing  
Who offers religious words without the deeds to back them up  
You will find you faith little help in times of goodness and times of despair.

But if you allow Christ to be first,  
If you abide in him,  
If you make the time to focus on Jesus,  
Then you will see his goodness flowering in your life,  
You will know his joy in all things,  
You will find in him the strength to enjoy life,  
Even in the darkest of times -  
For you will be part of the vine.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches, whoever remains in me and I in them, will bear much fruit"

Amen