

St Cuthberts Easter 5 03.05.15 John 15:1-8, Acts 8:26-40,

1 John 4:7-21

Jesus said to his disciples, *'I am the true vine'*

Over the last few weeks, either in leaflets pushed through the door or in broadcasts, there have been quite a few 'I ams' 'I am your parliamentary candidate.' 'I am on the side of working families.' 'I am standing for a strong economy.' 'I am committed to ending austerity.' I am.... the aim always to persuade, argue, bring you round to a particular point of view - win your vote - achieve power.

But the Jesus *I am*, is different. It is not a bid for power or an effort to sway opinion. It is not spoken on a public platform but in private to the disciples. It occurs in John's Gospel as part of the 'final discourse', the urgent last teachings just before his arrest. *'I am the true vine and my father is the vine grower.'* The disciples are perhaps relieved that after all the confusing and frightening talk of Jesus' departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit, that here at last is something they can relate to: - Vine tending. Something they know about. Now, I am no expert on vines but I have seen them in winter. They look pretty dead - cut back to the trunk with just a few branches firmly secured to the supports. Then in early summer after the first wild flush of growth – another pruning – lesser branches removed, others cut back - the focus always to achieve good fruit – plump, rich and juicy.

'I am the vine and my Father is the vine-grower...you are the branches.' The image expresses perfectly the life giving connectedness between the Father, Jesus and his followers. The love of the Father as he tends the vine, moves through the Son to the disciples as the rising sap moves through trunk and branches.

But this is not just a beautiful metaphor. *I am the true Vine* is a way for Jesus to identify himself with Israel – God's beloved vine. In Ps 80, the psalmist speaks of the vine rescued from Egypt and planted with care in the promised land. It flourished, but then declined – the fruit stolen or eaten by wild beasts.

So now Jesus has come as the true vine – to redeem God's people and restore them to a right relationship with the Father - a healing of what was broken and destroyed. But it is a healing that comes at a cost. The pruning knife with its sacrificial intent, will also fall on Jesus as he takes the way of the cross.

I am the true vine. There is no getting away from it, a vine is there to produce fruit – otherwise it is not worth having. And so we hear that the Father, as the vine grower ‘removes every branch that bears no fruit’ and ‘Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.’ And of course, there will be no fruit – no grapes – no wine - unless the branches stay connected - unless they ‘abide’ in the vine. There is in this image, it seems to me, a focus both on that rich interconnection between the Father (the vine grower), Jesus, (the vine) and his followers (the branches) AND , an emphasis on pruning, cutting away, cleansing – getting rid of the unproductive branches – going for bigger better fruit.

How can these two co-exist – the gain the loss? How does it all play out in our lived experience?

Well, our first reading was that lovely story of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip hears an angel telling him to change direction and go along the Wilderness Road between Jerusalem and Gaza. And it is on this road that he sees the Ethiopian eunuch. The Spirit urges him to go closer – literally go and join this strange foreigner in his chariot. Now it is one thing to change your plans – take a different road – but for Philip, raised with the Jewish code of religious purity, this is something else – there are issues of sexuality, custom, race, ritual cleanliness. But he puts all this aside and goes a step further: he shares the sacred scriptures, the holy word of Israel, with this outsider. Another barrier broken down. And finally as they travel the road together, the eunuch spots some water: *‘Look here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’* What indeed? – no question of the water not being holy or of not going along with other person’s suggestion. Together, they enter the water. Baptism is given and received. And there is rejoicing – rejoicing at the rich fruit that this encounter has brought.

And for me it is not so much – or not only - that someone, a foreigner, an outsider, came to know the love of Christ – abide in Christ. It is more - **how** it came about. There was that initial openness in both of them - a listening in Philip - a searching in the Ethiopian – both longing to abide. There was pruning – pruning away of difference and the niceties of religious rituals – giving room for humility and love to grow. There was sharing – sharing of the Scriptures and of the water of Baptism – a true co abiding in the love of Christ.

This is a good story it seems to me because it makes us think about the grace of giving and receiving – both essential parts in bring forth fruit – the fruits of the Spirit.

It is a good story too because it reminds us that the branches of the vine are not just church people or people we feel comfortable with – but all people – the more different the bigger the fruit!

It is a good story to hold onto, as we enter into the Eucharist – share the bread and wine and commit ourselves into the self giving love of Christ.

And finally, it is a good story for us just now on the eve of an election when we hear all those conflicting 'I ams'. A good story because it reminds us that we are one people and tells of the rich rewards that flow when people of difference find common ground, work together, and prune away all that divides them.

And on this note perhaps, as we go to exercise our vote on Thursday we might remember this story, think of the vine and those words from John's Epistle – *'Beloved let us love one another because love is from God.'*

Our prayer for the way ahead.