

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 2 May 2021
11.00am Rev Peter Cornick

Introduction

‘The poet W. H. Auden once wrote that it was easy enough to say ‘I will love you forever’; the difficult thing was to say (and mean), ‘I will love you at 4.15 next Thursday.’

Rowan Williams makes this observation in a meditation on Maundy Thursday.

Ongoing loving – loving in a specific place or context, is the difficult task. We often long to be somewhere else he writes – somewhere easier. Anywhere but with the people and circumstances ‘in front of our noses’. And during my lockdown sabbatical – rather like furlough – I was one who longed to be somewhere else. Perhaps you did too? Trying to be somewhere else, doesn’t face up to our challenge. But importantly, it betrays the nature of Jesus – and his love. Jesus’ love ‘stays put’ with people, circumstances, places. Williams invites us to stay put ‘with Jesus in his agony as he ‘stays put’ with us in his dying and rising.’ Resurrection, says Williams, ‘is in one way, a story about how Jesus never leaves those he loves’.

Resurrection says, ‘I will love you at 4.15 next Thursday.’

Or to put it another way;

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

The vine

Last Sunday, we pondered the good shepherd. ‘I am the good shepherd.’

Today: ‘I am the true vine.’

Whenever I read this passage, my mind goes back to a café in Athens, covered with a particularly beautiful and virulent vine – but that’s a holiday I can’t have at the moment; ‘stay put’ – stay with the passage.

Vines were used in the Old Testament to indicate Israel. The people of God. A community. Which is very important when we turn to this John passage.

Psalm 80 8-9 You brought a vine out of Egypt; ... it took deep root and filled the land.

But also, the vine indicates that Israel turned against God. Jeremiah says:

Yet I planted you as a choice vine,
from the purest stock.

How then did you turn degenerate
and become a wild vine? Jeremiah 2:21

So the vine imagery in this passage, seeks to place Jesus in the light bearing fruit. Seeks to restore the community as a choice vine.

This horticultural imagery calls us to see first of all, Jesus as the beautiful and virulent vine – pruned, tended, cut back so that it grows again, by the Father – the creator. And notice that it is not just the dead wood that is cut away – pruned – it is those branches that bear good fruit too – so that they can bear more.

15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

I am no gardener, but the imagery is of pruning, cutting back, to produce new growth.

Jesus extends this pruning, to indicate a cleanliness.

15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

This cleanliness does not appear to be referring to the ritual purity of the Temple; not to the Law; not even to baptism. The word used here for cleaning is unusual in the new testament. It has far more to do with cleaning work on a farm. Which is to do with growth; fruitfulness. Here, that growth and fruitfulness can only be achieved, by staying put with Jesus.

15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

But this horticultural image goes further.

15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches.

Now, Jesus is the vine, the main plant, the roots, the strength – but you – he’s talking to his disciples, his followers, his friends – you, are the branches. You are integral to me – to my ongoing health.

He is talking to the Christian community – yes, even in a pandemic world in 2021. Stay put – with me – see what’s under your noses.

Can you, with me, love at 4.15 next Thursday?

15:5 Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

It is by remaining with Jesus, the branch rooted in his trunk, that we bear fruit. Rooted in his word; rooted in his prayer; rooted in his love. A love that stays put; next Thursday, 4.15; resurrection love never leaving us.

By bearing much fruit, - that is how you become my disciples.

And were we to read on in this vine passage, it is clear that the sign of this fruit is – love. A suffering, dying, rising love of Jesus that never leaves us.

15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

That is the fruit. The purpose of all this pruning and abiding.

Love one another.

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

Growth and pruning

The image of the vine can appear somewhat benign. Rather like the vine of my memory in the café in Athens. But, remember, it only bears fruit if pruned. The dead wood cut away. In fact, bears more fruit when the good branches are pruned. And the branches only bear fruit if they remain in Jesus.

All this growth and fruitfulness draws us to the Hinde Street Growth plan. A plan to ask, how do we reach out to new people to try and

build our congregation – the vine. How do we tell our Hinde Street story? We could try to reach out to absolutely everyone – but we have tried to focus. We are going to reach out online as we believe particularly younger people will search there first. We are also going to build on our inclusive church standing by reaching out to the LGBT community. We want to take a stand on focused justice issues. Why should we want to effect this growth – why be more fruitful?

You might say, because we need more money to survive – and running a pre Covid deficit of 30 thousand year on year and with 300 thousand reserves, I'll leave you to work out how many years it would be until we really don't meet in person.

But that can't be the reason for a growth plan. The reason must be, because to become his disciples, Jesus says, we should bear much fruit. And to bear much fruit is to love one another – those who may be searching and questioning online; those in a community so often excluded from the very place they should feel included and loved; those for whom justice is denied.

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

Can I issue a warning though. As we take on a growth plan, and there is already excitement about the new things we can do, remember the vine story. There is pruning to do. Even of the fruitful branches. If we do new things, if that is where the energy is, what do we not do? Those are hard choices, but churches on the whole take on new things and forget the pruning bit. In their enthusiasm, they overstretch and get exhausted. What should we prune to do a new thing? What dies, to allow resurrection?

1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

Conclusion

The image of the vine draws us to love each other, particularly next Thursday at 4.15.

The image of the vine, draws us to growth and fruitfulness, in discipleship, in the church.

15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.