

John 15:1-16 The Vine and its Branches

Gardening

Our Green Bin was empty when I put it out on Thursday.

There's a message in that.

No gardening done again.

So I quickly filled it with leaves.

That's an easy way to make it look at least to the bin men that you use your green bin.

Not that I'm a gardener – I simply do what I'm told – very occasionally.

I couldn't tell a dahlia from a daisy.

And as someone once said, a weed is only a plant with the misfortune to be growing in the wrong place.

But here we have a gardening story.

For those of you with grapevines in your allotments.

And maybe there are some of you.

It's amazing what people do grow in their allotments.

Sometimes it's best not to ask.

Pruning Vines

This familiar reading from John's Gospel is about vines, and the maintenance of vines.

At least on the surface it is.

But as with all the parables that Jesus told, it's got a deeper significance.

Let's dig a little deeper into the soil of this vineyard and try to discover what Jesus was really saying about this grapevine.

Picture yourself on a Judean hillside.

There are a jumble of smallholdings, sheep grazing on the scrubby grass, and isolated groups of olive trees providing welcome shade.

Then there are some unassuming but precious plants.

Probably not the neatly trimmed, ordered rows of vines you've seen if you've visited commercial vineyards in Europe or Australia.

But ancient, knotted, rambling vines, unimportant but for one thing.

At certain times of the year, their branches will be dripping with bunches of juicy, round grapes.

These vines are precious because of their fruit – of course.

But they are precious because of what they represent.

It takes many years to grow a vine.

Or at least one that produces grapes worth eating.

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So in a turbulent place like Israel/Palestine has so often been,
And is right at this moment.

A vine is a symbol of peace, stability, prosperity.

A symbol of the peace and well-being encapsulated in the Hebrew word
Shalom.

A source of fruit in a thirsty land.

What are Vines For?

But apart from fruit, grapevines aren't good for much.

They can't be used for much else.

I found this remarkable little snippet in Ezekiel:

***Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make
pegs from it to hang things on? (Ezek 15:3)***

Apparently, vines don't even burn properly on a fire.

So a vine that doesn't produce fruit is a pretty useless vine.

And by this time, Israel was a pretty useless vine.

Despite the efforts of the gardener.

Israel in the time of Jesus was a conquered, divided, sorrowful land.

It was a fragmented and trampled land.

Carved up between various squabbling rulers, and the Romans were a
threatening presence.

Some still clung to the dream of the nation of Israel as the hope of the
nations.

Some were Jewish nationalists, what we'd call insurgents these days.

They were the **zealots** – like Simon, who was one of the lesser-known
disciples.

Others were fanatical about keeping the religion pure.

The **Pharisees** we hear so much about in the gospels - .

Both lots, and many more, wanted to see Israel restored.

They wanted Israel once more to be the vine that provided fruit for the
nations.

Because that's what Israel had been called to be.

Then, as now, their different visions for Israel varied widely.

But the image of the vine was still there – a symbol of what might be.

But time and again, her prophets had derived her for failing to even produce
a single palatable grape.

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But the dream remained.

Jesus is the Vine

So let's dwell for a while on that first verse:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

Jesus describes himself as a vine.

He reclaims the vision, and takes it on himself:

I am the vine.

I am the source of fruitfulness.

The sweetness in the desert.

And furthermore, I am the vine planted by God.

The vine that symbolises peace and well-being.

All those qualities encapsulated in the Hebrew word **Shalom**.

Jesus is the **Shalom** of God, come into a world that so **needs Shalom**.

And he is still – the bringer of peace into a world torn apart.

A world that needs to hear words of peace.

Needs to taste the fresh fruit of God's healing presence.

We are the branches

Maybe you'd been humming to yourself a half remembered chorus from the 1970s (SOF629):

You are the vine, and we are the branches, keep us abiding in you.

If you were, you're already at verse 5:

'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Those branches are the half-dead, ragged-looking bits of the vine.

The parts that get trimmed back, pruned.

The parts that look straggly and unkempt all winter when the leaves fall off.

But there is something special about the branches – they are the part of the vine that carries the fruit.

And, you'll remember, the fruit is the sole reason for the vine.

Just hold that thought.

Jesus is the vine.

The sole purpose of the vine is fruit.

It's the branches that bear the fruit.

That's our job.

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Put another way, Jesus came, was sent by God,
To bring healing to God's people, and healing to the nations.
Now, God is entrusting the work of Jesus to us.
He passes on that role as healer to us.
The branches of a vine planted and nourished by God and there to bear
fruit for the healing of the nations.

We are called to bear fruit – that fruit which can transform life, and bring
hope, peace, **Shalom**.

The Sap

Sap is amazing – I remember just a little from biology at school.
Just enough to remember it completely wrong.
But I know that sap is the lifeblood of the vine.
I know that it's the sap that carries the nutrients from the soil to the whole
plant.
That carries the enzymes that cause the plant to behave differently in
summer than in winter – cause it to grow, and cause it to bear fruit.
And I know something else.
That if a branch is detached from the plant, the sap can't flow.
And the branch withers and dies.

Think about the grape – it consists mainly of juice – juice which consists of
water.
Where does this water come from?
From the sap of the vine.
There is no other way that grapes become fat and juicy, except through the
sap fed to them from the vine through its branches.

Which is why Jesus' illustration is so brilliant.
Because it's the same for Christians.
Whilst we've connected to the vine, sap will flow.
However twisted and ugly the branch may look from the outside, if its
connected to the source of life, it can bear fruit.

So Jesus urges his disciples to remain in him.
Some translations use the word **abide**.
Lovely word, that, in the same class as **Shalom**.

He warns us about becoming detached.

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Because if you become detached, you will lose that source of life, that sap, which nourishes and enables you to grow.

But if you remain in him, the life of Christ will flow through you.

The Spirit of God, promise by Christ, will be your source of strength and nourishment, your source of life and healing.

The Fruit

And you will bear fruit.

And what is this fruit?

Paul in Galatians describes what this fruit consists of:

Lots of good things:

***Love, joy, peace,
Patience, kindness, generosity,
Gentleness, faithfulness, self-control.***

Most of us recognise these things as great virtues.

Most of us would also recognise them as very difficult virtues, impossible virtues - to show consistently.

But how can we possibly bear fruit such as this consistently and faithfully in our lives?

Only because we are connected to the vine.

The vine that is Christ.

The vine that is planted and nourished by God.

And which exists only to bear fruit.

Through us, who are the branches of the vine which bear the fruit.

This is only possible because of Jesus.

This is why Jesus came – to connect us to God, who is the source of life.

So that we can be fruitful, as we were made to be.

So that we can bring the ***Shalom*** of God into the world in which he has placed us.

Hand out Grapes

Prayer is very closely related to fruit-bearing for the Christian.

It's the sap that keeps the branches alive.

The source of nourishment, it carries the message of God to us, and enables us to share our deepest needs with God.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. (v.7)

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If we're **abiding** in Christ, the words of Christ are the nourishment we feed on as we serve him in our lives.

If we're **abiding** in Christ, we will be listening to his words, they will become part of us, they will illuminate our lives, be the source of the hope within us.

If we're **abiding** in Christ, we will be obedient to his word, that word that calls us simply to love one another, unreservedly, unconditionally.

We will seek the best for all, even those we would call our enemies.

We will put the needs of others before our own.

We will be producing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, the:

Love, joy, peace,

Patience, kindness, generosity,

Gentleness, faithfulness, self-control.

And if our lives are full of these things, it is natural that:

the things we wish for,

the things we long for,

the things we pray for,

will be the things of God.

Spoken to us by the Spirit of God.

Spoken by us in prayer in the Spirit of God.

Everyone needs a grape – **but please keep hold of it for now.**

Look

You may want to concentrate on it whilst we pray – not everybody finds closing their eyes the most helpful thing.

Enjoy its lush colour, its cool texture, it's association with summer.

Let us remember what this grape represents:

The goodness, the **shalom** of the presence of God among the nations.

The sweetness of the presence of God in the darkest, the driest, the hardest of places.

Let us enjoy the presence of God, and thank him for his presence.

Let us abide in his presence, and allow his Spirit to speak through us.

Hold

Let us remember that Jesus calls us to love each other as he has loved us.

That love is possible because we are connected to the source of life.

We are branches of the vine that is Christ.

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Let us hold up before God the places where peace, where Shalom is so desperately needed:

Lord, you describe yourself as a vine, and us as branches of that vine. You called us to bear fruit through the nourishment and life which comes to us through you – fruit of goodness, faithfulness, compassion.

Taste

Allow the sharpness of its flavour to take you by surprise:

- The fresh flavour of the love and grace of God poured out.
- The taste of hope given to those with none
- The taste of forgiveness replacing the pain of guilt
- The taste of new possibilities replacing old habits

Lord, we pray that we too may be that fresh taste of hope in our world, that those around us may taste the fruit of your goodness as we meet, work and talk with them.

In the name of Jesus. **Amen**