

Song: Hallelujah

Come and hear the wondrous love
The mighty God who reigns above
Has entered in to dwell with us
Hallelujah

On the earth, our saviour lived
The Son of Man, the servant king
And by his death, he bore our sin
Hallelujah

Chorus

*The fight is over, the battle done
The victory of life is won
The song of triumph has begun!
Hallelujah*

The powers of hell had seemed to win
But Christ has conquered death and sin
Let's raise our voices for our king!
Hallelujah

For very soon, he will return
And place all things beneath his throne
And take us to our heav'nly home
Hallelujah

So now by faith we persevere
And in his strength, we will not fear
For as we meet, our God is here
Hallelujah

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Prayer: Father We Are Yours

Father,
We are yours.
We cannot be bought; you paid the great price.
We bow down as servants; you lift us up friends.

Jesus,
We are good.
Made in your image, channelling your style.
We bow down as sinners, you lift us up saints.

Spirit,
We are called.
You've got our number, you speak our names
We bow down as failures, you lift us up
to God
as his precious children.

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[John 15:1-8](#)

Last week we thought about one of the seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel, namely, 'I am the Good Shepherd.' This week we think about another one: 'I am the Vine.'

We need to carry over two things from last week. The first is to remember that this very emphatic way of saying 'I am' indicates a claim by Jesus to divinity, reminiscent of God calling himself 'I am who I am' to Moses at the burning bush.

The second thing we need to carry over is to look to the Old Testament for some background to the title. So just as we looked at the title of 'Shepherd' last week, we must now look at 'Vine', and the obvious place to go is [Isaiah 5:1-7](#), where the prophet describes Israel as like a vineyard. However, it's a bad vineyard, and is symbolic of God's people being persistently and seriously disobedient to God through their disregard for justice. God promises to withdraw the vineyard's protective hedge and leave it to decay and destruction.

A new vineyard is needed. That's what Jesus claims to be here in today's passage. This is yet another New Testament passage where Jesus claims to be the True Israel, fulfilling everything that Israel should have done but didn't.

And with Jesus' disciples being the branches, Jesus says that the vineyard is now constituted differently, not on the basis of observing Torah, but on the basis of union with him.

Now we often say that all metaphors are limited, and one of the limitations here is that Jesus doesn't describe how we become branches of the vine. There's nothing obvious here about salvation by grace through faith, for example. We conclude that's not the purpose of Jesus choosing this image.

Instead, Jesus seems to talk about what it takes to *remain* one of the branches. His Father is the gardener (verse 1). In the Apocrypha, the literature between the Old and New Testaments that our Catholic friends recognise as Scripture but we don't,

The state of a tree's fruit ... was said to attest how well the farmer ... had cared for it (Sir 27:6), reinforcing the importance of a gardener's care for it.¹

So, if you like, God's reputation is at stake here! But he trusts that reputation to our behaviour – a very chancy thing, you may well think. It's something that came home in a distressingly powerful way to me this last week when reports began to appear online that alleged the long-deceased headmaster of my old secondary school was a paedophile. You see, it was a Church of England school, and one of the alleged victims said that this behaviour pushed him towards atheism.

God's reputation is at stake according to the conduct of his people.

So we need to give careful attention to our relationship with Christ.

A couple of things strike me about that in the reading.

The **first** is that we have a choice between being pruned and being cut off. Both sound painful. There is no choice that involves the avoidance of pain. It's rather as I heard Adrian Plass put it some years ago:

Life is a choice between doing what you don't want to do and doing what you really don't want to do.

What's the difference between being pruned and being cut off? Pruning took place in late Spring: the tendrils of the vine were clipped back to allow the fruit to grow. The idea was to get the vine to put all its energy into producing fruit.²

Being cut off was much worse. This was when branches that would no longer produce fruit were removed to leave space for new ones that would.

I'm sure you can see some spiritual parallels here. God the Father is determined that the church of his Son Jesus be spiritually fruitful in what it

does. If we share that concern (and if not, why not?) then we shall be willing to submit to his pruning, removing those things from our lives individually and together that get in the way of fruit growing.

What might God prune from our lives if we are willing to let him work in us so that we are fruitful? I suspect it would include all those frivolous and shallow things on which we spend our time. How many of us are just not getting down to serious prayer and spiritual reading because we are filling our time with trashy magazines, Internet gossip, and maybe worse things? Or maybe he's calling us to put aside something good in favour of what is better?

Are we aware of God wanting to prune us of the things that stop us going deeper with him?

And then what about the cutting off? How many of us have not only become unfruitful, we have also managed to get ourselves in the way of those promising branches that could become fruitful?

How might that happen? Do we dominate church life at the expense of those who want to move forward spiritually? Have we belittled the passion of those who want to press on with Christ?

Look at how few of us take our devotional life seriously, to the point that some surveys show many Christians only interact with the Bible on a Sunday morning, and when we talk about what we believe, it's utterly infused with the values of the world rather than the Gospel.

In these cases, God has every right to look at his church and say, the situation is so serious that I shall have to get some people out of the way if the church is to have any hope.

Pray God that we shall not give him reason to consider us. Pray God instead that we accept his pruning.

The **second** strand of Jesus' thought I wanted to pick up on is connected with this and is all the language about remaining – us remaining in Christ and Christ remaining in us.

The late Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, *The Message*, paraphrases this language as a call to make our home in Jesus just as he does in us, or to be joined to him in an intimate and organic relationship.

I wonder what it means to be at home with Jesus? Surely it sounds like the sort of relationship where we are comfortable with him – as a Person, and in what he says and what he does. It's not just a distant admiration for a great man: it's such a desire for him that we want to draw close to him and even imitate him.

So yes, this begins with all the sorts of things I regularly bang on about: the importance of personal Bible reading and prayer, and all the other spiritual disciplines.

But that's only where it begins. If it stops there it won't be enough for us to remain in Christ. I have known avid Bible readers who have also been avid back stabbers.

It was the twentieth century American saint A W Tozer who captured the spirit of what I'm trying to say here in these words of his:

The driver on the highway is safe not when he reads the signs, but when he obeys them.³

When we not only listen to Jesus but put into practice what he says, then what do we think the result will be? Answer: spiritual fruitfulness.

Alternatively, when we hear the words of Jesus (and most of us have heard them regularly for years) but do nothing about them, what is the logical conclusion? The answer, surely, is the predominantly fruitless church that we have today.

God is determined to have a fruitful vine,, not one he has to leave to rack and ruin again. Will we draw close to him in listening and in obedience so that he makes us fruitful for him? Or will we be so casual in our faith that in the end he says, these people are getting in the way, I must remove them so that I can use newer and younger branches?

Song: You Are The Vine

You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You
You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You

And we will go (And we will go)

In Your love (In Your love)
And we will go (And we will go)
In Your Name (In Your Name)
That the world (That the world)
Will surely know (Will surely know)
That You have power to heal
And to save

You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You

And we will go (And we will go)
In Your love (In Your love)
And we will go (And we will go)
In Your Name (In Your Name)
That the world (That the world)
Will surely know (Will surely know)
That You have power to heal
And to save

You are the Vine
We are the branches
Keep us abiding in You
You are the Vine
And we are the branches
Keep us abiding in You
Keep us abiding in You

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Administered by Song Solutions/CopyCare,
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Prayer Song: We Seek Your Kingdom

We seek your kingdom throughout every sphere
We long for heavens demonstration here
Jesus your light shine bright for all to see
Transform, revive and heal society

Before all things, in him were all things made
Inspiring media, culture and trade
May all our work serve your economy
Transform, revive and heal society

Peace, truth and justice reigning everywhere
With us be present in our public square
Fill all who lead with your integrity
Transform, revive and heal society

Forgive us Lord, when we have not engaged
Failing to scribe your heart on history's page
Make us again what we were made to be
Transform, revive and heal society

Faithful to govern ever may we be
Selfless in service, loving constantly
In everything may your authority
Transform, revive and heal society

Music: Abide With Me (Public Domain) Henry Francis Lyte
Lyrics: Noel Robinson, Andy Flannagan, Graham Hunter

Hymn: All Praise To Our Redeeming Lord

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
and gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope,
we hand in hand go on.

The gift which he on one bestows
we all delight to prove;
the grace through every vessel flows,
in purest streams of love.

Even now we think and speak the same,
and cordially agree;

concentred all, through Jesus' name,
in perfect harmony.

We all partake the joy of one,
the common peace we feel,
a peace to sensual minds unknown,
a joy unspeakable.

And if our fellowship below
in Jesus be so sweet,
What height of rapture shall we know
When round his throne we meet.

Charles Wesley, 1707-1788

Blessing

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God
and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you all, now and always.

Amen.

¹ Craig S Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Volume 2*, p994.

² <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-the-true-vine-in-john-15/>

³ <https://www.pinterest.com/CandidChristian/aw-tozer-quotes/>