

Reflection for Wednesday May 13th

by Colleen Clayton

John 15:1-8

The Vine and the Branches

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

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. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Reflection

In the vicarage garden there is a very large grapevine with a trunk that is the thickness of my forearm. Before I moved in there, I don’t think it had been pruned for a long time and so it had grown quite unruly. Its branches stretched out towards the house so that it had almost blocked the path to the back garden, it had climbed all through the lemon tree and it was weighing down its trellis.

Fortunately, it is now autumn so it is the right time of year to cut it back. It has now been reduced to its trunk plus a few, short branches. I anticipate that next Spring, it will shoot forth with plenty of new growth and hopefully, it will bear good fruit.

I assume that when it was planted it must have been a good fruiting variety, otherwise, why put it in? But when its branches were cut off, the fruit that was on them was small, hard and sour. The dark, mildewy conditions inside the thick canopy of the overgrown grapevine meant that this fruit, at least, had not ripened or reached its potential in terms of either flavour or size. Untended vines are not healthy and they do not produce good fruit.

When Jesus says that he is the true vine, he is indicating that the fruit that will be borne by those who abide in him will be the kind of good fruit that his Father, the vine grower, wants. It is only through remaining firmly attached to Jesus and relying on him to be the sap, the life-blood

flowing through our lives, that we can bear good fruit. Apart from him we can do nothing.

When I cut back the vicarage grapevine, it involved removing much of the growth on the plant. One of the things that achieved was that, suddenly, the structure of the vine itself was visible. Covered in leafy, though fruitless, branches the vine itself was obscured. Now, it is clear.

I think this can sometimes be true in our lives as individuals and as a parish. Sometimes we can grow in unruly and unproductive ways so that we end up with too much clutter to clearly see what should be at our centre. Things that should be fruit bearing can turn into ends in themselves with their true purpose forgotten. A hard cutting out of unproductive branches can feel terrifying but it can also let in light and warmth and enable us to see Jesus; strong, life-giving, supportive, wanting us to bear good fruit.

The Gospel tells us that the branches that are cut out are thrown into the fire and burned. It is easy to read that as a metaphor for Hell but I don't think that is really what Jesus is saying. This whole story is rich with agricultural imagery. In a vineyard, branches are not burned as punishment for being evil, they are burned because they are worthless. This is John's strong language to reinforce to the disciples, and to us, that in order to live with purpose, we must abide in God's love.

In this Gospel passage Jesus talks about two kinds of cutting. There is the cutting out of unproductive branches, and the cutting back of productive ones. Again, I think both these kinds of cutting are important in our lives as individuals and as a community. What are the parts of us that do bear fruit but that could flourish more if they were pruned and shaped? We are called to a responsible use of all our gifts so that we don't bear tiny, sour, shrivelled fruit but the large, juicy, luscious, produce of abundant life. Growing such fruit is dependent on our flourishing. When we are healthy and abiding strongly in the vine we bring forth fruit that is an offering of our lives to God but also to God's world.

The Lord be with you.