

S.P.A.C.E. for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Wednesday 20th January 2021

The vine and the branches

15 ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^{1a} so that it will be even more fruitful. **3** You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4** Remain 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. **6** If 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. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **10** If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. **11** I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. **12** My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. **17** This is my command: love each other.

John 15:1-17



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A vine ready for harvest speaks of fruitfulness and flavour and carries the promise of plenty. What to us until recently may have carried a hint of the exotic was a common sight to Jesus' contemporaries, seen a means of earning a livelihood - and a lot of hard work. But to them it also carried a deeper meaning because in the Old Testament the vine had come to symbolise the nation itself.

For example, addressing his fellow countrymen Jeremiah writes:

I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. (Jeremiah 2:21)

and Isaiah:

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. (Isaiah 5:7)

But any self-satisfaction from these positive national affirmations would be short lived: both prophets used the familiar vineyard imagery as a challenge. The Jeremiah quotation continues:

.... How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?

and Isaiah:

....And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress

The prophets' message was that although Israel was God's own vineyard it was one which had seriously degenerated.

Jesus' contemporary audience was familiar with both the positive and negative aspects of the metaphor of Israel being God's vineyard. So when Jesus referred to himself as the true vine they could see he was identifying himself with God's people, Israel, while simultaneously contrasting himself with the imperfection of the vine that Israel had become. Jesus' underlying point was that they should place trust in him for their salvation, rather than placing it in their tainted national and religious heritage. Faith in God as revealed through, and rooted in, Jesus Christ is the essential; Jewish birth or religious observance count for little without this faith.

Jesus goes on to develop the vine analogy. For his disciples, and so for us, there is:

- a tough message - there is no room for unfruitfulness or complacency (vs.2&6);
- a hope – that we will bear much fruit (v8); *and*:
- an invitation – to “remain in” or “abide in” Jesus and allow him to abide in us (v4-7).

If we as Christians **all** accept that invitation and have that sense of oneness with Jesus - “abiding” in Jesus – then, logically, we must be united with one another. Conversely if we are disunited or fragmented we cannot be truly abiding in Jesus. Little wonder then that this year's Week or Prayer for Christian Unity takes the theme “Abiding in Christ”.

Jesus did not specifically set out what fruit his disciples would bear but he continues by speaking of God's love for his Son and for us, and of his own love for his disciples. At the end of the passage above he repeats the New Commandment:

This is my command: Love one another (v17)

Is this mutual love between fellow disciples the fruit which disciples will bear if they truly abide in Jesus? I think it must be.

In an increasing factionalised and fragmented world may Christians stand apart as people of unity, obedient to Our Lord's command to love one another in a way which transcends differences of interpretation, tradition or denomination.

For prayer and reflection...

Meditating on themes from John 15

Where are our roots?

- *in our family*
- *in our community or our nation*
- *in our church and its tradition*
- *in our faith in Jesus Christ himself*

Heavenly Father, we draw our strength and our sense of who we are from so many sources. We give you thanks for each of these, for all the different things which have brought us to make us the people we are today. We offer these to you, Lord, that those things which have given us support and helped form our character may now be used for your service. But above all we give thanks for the risen Lord Jesus and for the bond of love between him and each of us. May that be a continuing source of strength that sustains us and grows as we develop and mature in our faith.

Lord, as you abide in us,
May we abide in you.

What is there in our own life or in our church life that is unfruitful?

Father we pray for your church,
that it may be a loving, caring, welcoming and accepting church;
a church that reaches out to those who seek to find out about you;
a church that teaches and delights the young and sustains the old;
a church that challenges each of us to move ahead in our faith;
a church that cares for those who are overlooked by the rest of society;
a church that lives out your command to love one another;
a church which reveals its love through service to others rather than by words.

Heavenly Father, may we be that sort of church. Bless and guide Pete our Rector, and Tim, Joanna, Penny and John our wardens. May the noise of our own ideas and our projects never drown the small voice calling us to focus on your priorities of love and service.

Lord, as you abide in us,
May we abide in you.

Finally Lord we pray for those in need,

- for those suffering from Covid,
- for the medical staff, scientists and all who are working to bring physical healing,
- for those suffering with mental health issues,
- for those worried for their family or their future during this crisis,
- for those whose individual needs are known personally to us.

Lord for those we have named and those known to us only through headlines and TV reports, we pray that you will give them strength and that they may draw comfort from your abiding presence alongside them in their troubles.

Lord, as you abide in us,
May we abide in you.

Finally with events in the USA in the minds of many of us this week, a prayer from the Episcopal Church of America.

(This was as it was written for Americans to use)

Oh God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your son. Look now with compassion on the entire human family; and particularly this part of the family, in the United States, and those in our nation's capital; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The next S.P.A.C.E. reflection will be posted on February 3rd