

Sermon on Sunday 28 April 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Readings: 1 John 4. 7-16 & John 15. 1-8

John 15. 2: "Every branch that does bear fruit (my Father) prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."



Whenever the biblical imagery gets horticultural I usually take a step back, because there are always plenty of people in the congregation who know far more about gardening than I do.

But, as I know you will all be anxious to get your Parish AGM started on time, let me take you for a brisk homiletic stroll around the vineyard.

“I am the true vine”. This is the seventh and last of the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus that give a kind of keynote to John’s Gospel. The branch that abides in the True Vine bears much fruit – but only if the vine-grower looks after it.

Here’s a personal reminiscence that maybe offers itself as a kind of parable.

In my student days, in my grandmother’s village, in the Jagst valley deep in upcountry Franconia, my German half-cousins still had a share in their village’s vineyard. I was a regular visitor in my vacations and got involved with almost the full cycle of the life of a grapevine.

The vineyard didn’t look a very promising sight in February. We Brits usually see vineyards on our summer holidays when the long rows of vines are lush and green. In winter, there were just long straight rows of black, stubby, gnarled stems standing in grey, gravelly soil.

Have you noticed that vineyards tend to be on the sides of big steep hills? Think of the Rhine or Moselle valleys, of the Duoro valley in Portugal. Grapes will grow almost anywhere there’s sunshine, but they do seem to grow best in places that are hard to get to.

As the branches started to sprout in early spring, they had to be trained by hand along the wires that link the stems, so you got as much greenery as possible exposed to the sun. And it all had to be done by hand, vine by vine, up and down the steep, gravelly hillside.

As summer went on you had to make sure there wasn't too much greenery, because the grapes were now growing and you wanted the sun to shine on them, not on the leaves. Up and down the steep, gravelly hillside we'd go, thinning out the foliage.

You could never be sure you'd get much reward. There were so many things beyond your control. A late frost in March or April killing the buds on the branches. A dry May or June when the vines need rain. A wet August or September when the grapes need sunshine. You didn't get a good vintage every year. Some bad years there was almost nothing to show for it, but all the work had to be done.

Disappointingly, I never got to help with a harvest. I'm sure it would have been exhausting, but richly rewarding. I always had to be back at college for the start of October, and you never know from one year to the next when the grapes would be ripe for harvest. Some years the harvesting in Jagsttal was as late as November. That was good, because the later wines were always the richest and sweetest.

But you couldn't sit back and relax after the harvest. Long before the wine was bottled, the pruning began. As the leaves died away, we went through the vineyard again, up and down those long, steep rows, cutting the branches back almost to the stem.

Grapes grow best when they are close to the stem.

How's our parable shaping up? First point. Grapes can grow anywhere, but they grow best on steep hillsides and in soil that's not well suited to other crops. Does God expect to get the best fruit from some of the most challenging places?

Growing fruit from the vine is hard work. Seriously hard work - for the gardener. We're not the gardener, we're the branches. Who's the gardener? 'My father is the gardener'. All that cycle of loving care and husbandry is God's work. God puts an awful lot of work into us.

The gardener can never be certain that he, or she, will get good fruit. At the start of the year the stem can look very unpromising - bare and gnarled and stumpy. But the gardener shows faith in each one, takes time to train and support its branches as they grow.

If the gardener has to be active, he also has to be patient. The gardener lets each bunch of grapes grow to ripeness, gives it time to soak in as much sun as it needs, to grow as sweet and rich as it can. Our God is patient, even when we are not. He will give us time to bear fruit.

Even after a bad harvest, he will not despair of us. He will cut away everything in our lives that inhibits our growth, the dead wood and the exhausted refuse of past efforts, and encourage us to start growing again.

In Biblical imagery, the fruit is not grapes. The fruit becomes wine – with all its associations with richness, with Kingship, with Eucharist, with the feasts of the Kingdom of God. That is the fruit we are called to bear. Yes, wine is grape juice, but it is transformed in fermentation. Wine keeps and matures. Our fruit is also a life transformed, made rich and powerful, and made to last and get better year by year.

Nearly time for the Parish AGM. The parable isn't just about our personal lives. Are we abiding in the True Vine as a community? Today is a good time to take stock of the fruit that we have borne as a Parish in the season past, and to prepare for a season to come. A time for pruning? For a fresh start. Getting rid of the rubbish, perhaps having to face some painful decisions on things we need to let go, trimming back the old familiar branches and asking God to let us start growing again – perhaps in new directions.

Keeping the branches short and close to the stem, close to the vine. Keeping us close to Jesus in all we do. That's where the good fruit grows. We may need to be patient as we wait for the harvest, for when the time is right and the fruit the best – some of that wine, perhaps, we will only enjoy in another Kingdom,

One last thought from John 15, verse 4. The branch cannot bear fruit on its own, it can only do so if it remains in the vine. Jesus doesn't say it, but the opposite is true as well. The vine cannot bear fruit without its branches; that's us.

Like I said, God is putting a lot of faith in us. There will be no wine in the Kingdom of God, except the wine that comes from the fruit we bear!