

## The vine – John 15: 1-8

Have you ever been to a vineyard to see the grapes growing on the vine? Or perhaps you have tried to train a vine to grow on the roof of a greenhouse in the hope that sweet and succulent grapes will develop?

The first time I saw grapes growing in Northern Ireland was in Ballygally when I went to visit a member of my congregation. Renown for their gardening ability I had a wonderful tour of their garden complete with vegetables, flowers, berry bushes and numerous little nooks and crannies for birds, insects, butterflies and frogs but the thing I remember most was the bunches of grapes hanging from a vine which had been trained to grow across the conservatory panes of glass. I had imagined grapes could only have been produced in sun drenched lands of Spain and Greece but here in Larne were numerous little bunches of admittedly rather tart grapes but grapes none the less.

On asking questions about how they had managed to grow such an exotic fruit for County Antrim I was told it had taken many years and a lot of hard work and sometimes they wondered if it had been worth the effort when the product was at times so underwhelming but they were gardeners and they did not like to give up despite the extra work involved in cutting and pruning and watering and feeding.

Every time I read this passage from John, I am transported back to that sunroom and I can picture the grapes resplendent in the sunlight.

A romantic notion maybe but really a far cry from what Jesus is describing as the true vine, the real vine. Because in these few verses we see challenge, warning, promise and pain.

Jesus begins by reminding us that anything we may have to endure, he has already undergone. As the vine, he has already been broken and pruned, producing the strong foundation from which all else may proceed. This is the core. The branches will only be as strong as that to which they are attached. If the vine is not constant, not true, not strong then how can it support the branches which rely upon it for nourishment and life?

Speaking to people who relied upon growing their own fruit and vegetables, this was a conversation which would have been understood immediately. There was also a deeper understanding that we might miss but which would have been instantly recognisable to this first audience. Throughout the Old Testament there are references made to the people of God as God's vineyard. This teaching on the vine was a continuing revelation on the identity of God's people. This was a personal story for them not some analogy rooted in theory. If the root is not healthy, then neither will the fruit be. And the healthier the vine, then the more fruitful branches it can support.

So far so good. That all makes perfect sense. We know we are stronger when we are together, can accomplish so much more when we pool resources, can support more needs when we have numbers and money to do it. We can even

understand the wisdom in breaking off the bad branches that produce no fruit. Painful although it may be there are some habits, mindsets, relationships, routines, rituals that are no longer producing fruit in our own lives and in the life of our congregation. These may be things we have become accustomed to, things that produce a feeling of familiarity and comfort, things that we actively enjoy but they are no longer producing fruit. This is harder to bear because this begins to impact directly on us and our wants and our demands and our comfort. But this passage leaves no room for fruitless branches and Jesus goes even further. Even the fruitful branches must undergo pruning to insure they will produce more fruit.

Now that seems really tough. To be pruned back to hardly anything when you are in full bloom or had just produced a great harvest does seem unfair and yet in the world of horticulture and gardening – this is the healthiest option for the plant. Allowing it to grow without constraint would ultimately result in an overgrown mess, with the nutrient resources going into the appearance rather than the fruit bearing capacity. We get it when it is a plant but harder to accept when we are the ones being approached by pruning shears.

But before we shy away or pick up our heels and run from the pruning, Jesus reminds us – for you can do nothing without me – if you remain in me and my words remain in you then you will ask for anything you wish and you shall have it.

Do we really believe that? Maybe you are already remembering the prayers asking for healing or discernment or safety or freedom from pain and yet the loved one has died, the wisdom has not come, attacks continued, pain relief was scant. Why did the prayer not get answered in the way we wanted? Were we not good enough, holy enough, strong enough, smart enough, kind enough etc etc? These feelings will be familiar to all of us who have prayed fervently with broken hearts and I don't think we will ever be able to understand why some things happen as they do but just as a plant has no understanding of why they are being pruned, we have to trust that God is continuing to love us, uplift us, bless us and have mercy upon us in the act of pruning and breaking. And I speak as one who has asked God so many times – why is this happening?

So in the midst of the anguish of loss and the unbearable pain we may have to endure we must also hold on to the many examples of the love we have experienced and shared. The times when we have felt supported and encouraged and guided. The memories of God coming alongside us and picking us up. Those times are just as true as the painful and feeling abandoned moments.

And for everyone this pandemic has felt like extreme pruning. We have all experienced loss to a greater or lesser degree. Some have lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost security, lost hope. Some have lost the final few months when they could enjoy family and friends due to illness or dementia. We have lost our familiar routines at home and work and school

and church. Lost our longed for holidays and hobbies and social outlets.

Yet even a totally stripped back vine which shows little evidence of life, can flourish again in time, stronger than it was before. The same is true for us and in these words of Jesus we have the assurance that other branches are also fruitful – we do not have to meet every need. We can support those who can do the work better than us which is why we partner with The people's kitchen and the South Belfast Foodbank. It is why we work closely with L'Arche and root soup. All these are branches which can and do produce fruit just as we can and do produce fruit. We work with the branches of local churches and community groups, Ormeau Churches Together. The branches of Christian Aid and Send a Cow. The branches of Wycliffe and Tearfund.

The image of the vine, the branches and the rich fruit remind us of how important it is that we work together; and more than that, how important it is for us to be the providers of life, grace, and abundance of spirit in order that those who receive from us, can be a source of nourishment and strength to others as they carry out their work. Sometimes we are pruned in order to allow other branches to bear fruit.

Pruning is painful but it is necessary. An unpruned garden becomes an overgrown garden, filled with weeds, difficult to move around within, lacking clarity and differentiation. It does not bring beauty or fruit and any healthy growth is often impeded by the undergrowth. The same could be said of unpruned lives, unpruned ministry and unpruned mission.

But perhaps in the pain of this pruning we may each find we will bear the sweetest fruit of all.

Heavenly Father

You are gardener, farmer and creator. We do not always understand why things happen as they do. We do not understand the times of pain we must endure. Yet we know everything in time will pass and we come closer to the day when our final reward will be ours. Until then help us to be fruitful in our lives, our work, our mission, our ministries and may we bear the pain that might come knowing you will also be there to bind up our wounds through the tender companionship of your Son in whose name we pray.

AMEN