

Amington 10.30am Morning service & 5pm EP
BCP

The I am Sayings. John 15:1-8.
I am the true Vine. 11.7.2021

Along with many people who call themselves Christian we attend a church service . Services usually finish with a final prayer and a blessing.

One I like finishes with these words, “May we be blessed as we bless one another”. It seems a fair trade but how often do others feel really blessed by our thoughts and actions? Surveys of ethical behaviour rarely find much difference between Christian and non-Christian behaviour.

Few so-called Christian nations give a significant portion of their GDP to the assistance of disadvantaged regions.

Some, would you believe, even reduce their contribution.

Most of the soldiers in both World Wars said they were Christians.

Arguments between Catholics and Protestants. Think of the forced colonization of India and much of Africa.

Not all good examples of following Jesus. To provide a balance we also have those Christians who started our education system, the hospitals were often Christian based, and many reformers who were motivated by what seems a genuine real faith.

Today's reading is the seventh of the I am sayings credited to Jesus. It is the image of Jesus as the true vine.

It seems that Jesus is addressing his disciples, those who had already chosen to follow him. The grapevine was an image well known to the Jews.

In the Old Testament many writers used the vine as a metaphor for Israel and of God as the gardener.

In John the image is expanded and the branches on the vine are, probably, the disciples.

Obviously thinking of Jesus as the true vine is a metaphor yet metaphors can remind us of truth that we may prefer to overlook.

For example, it may seem a minor point but a vine that is grown for fruit production is only cultivated for that one reason.

If it does not produce grapes it has no other purpose.

For those who believe that the main purpose of Church is getting together for worship may be to miss Jesus' point.

What is the fruit that is being produced?

A grocery shop has a purpose for a community.

If our Church were to disappear tomorrow it is worth asking if and why it would be missed.

What good fruit is produced here?

I would hope that it would be the Ark, Place of Welcome, Knit and natter and pastoral care long before it was the excellence of the church services and sermons.

It is true that any metaphor can be subject to unwise interpretation.

That grape you have just tasted might well be the best you have encountered, but as any gardener would tell you, the chances of taking a seed from that grape and getting it to produce the same version of grape with the same characteristics is virtually nil.

The standard practice is to select the good fruiting vine with great care, take cuttings and graft them onto separate root stock.

Simply being in the same vicinity as the well grafted stock won't do it.

Joining a congregation where there are warm and active Christians doesn't mean that all who are associated with that congregation will have those same characteristics.

Each individual shoot or person must be considered separately.

If we look back over the last two thousand years we see all too often it has not always been Jesus' teaching with his central principles of compassion, forgiveness, peace, justice and acceptance, which has always been at the centre of the Church.

Sometimes it is as if it has been grafted on to power, position, exclusivity and religiosity.

The evidence we look for is what fruit has been produced.

Families are linked automatically by relationships.

You may not always like your cousin or brother but there is a tie which is there by birth.

This is not so with a faith.

We consider ourselves to be part of a church family which is good.

But that is not what links us to Jesus as the

vine.

The sap of life for those attached to Jesus is the flow of love and compassion.

Nor are we linked to the vine by labels like being born again, like being an evangelical, or a liberal or conservative or a Bible believing Christian.

The real fruits of faith are seen more in our attitudes to others than in our statements of faith.

Back to the Vine metaphor.

If the branch is not productive or if it begins to die, horticultural practice suggests it should be cut off.

In the metaphor it is not clear if Jesus was talking about the person or the characteristics of a person or even if his words should apply to whole communities.

Not all parts of the vine produce good fruit and not all aspects of human behaviour are acceptable. That is patently true.

What is debatable and which even seems at odds with other things Jesus said, is his reported statements about destruction and burning of the parts which have been cut.

The notion that the humans themselves might be cut off, rejected and burned does not fit in with the actions and teachings of Jesus.

In other places, for example, he accepted sinners, undesirables and those who had no right to be accepted.

However since he seems to acknowledge that even among the faithful we should expect that there will be those who will have attitudes and behaviour which are contrary to the principles he taught.

It follows that such behaviour and attitudes should be corrected.

Sadly the identification of weakness is not automatically followed by instant improvement.

It's all very well to agree in principle to love enemies, to love the poor and fight for the disadvantaged but, in practice, it's difficult to do alone.

Perhaps we get a hint of how to start becoming a productive part of the vine in Jesus words of encouragement.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.

If you abide in me and I in you, you bear much fruit.

But apart from me you can do nothing.”

We can attend church, listen to sermons and read the Bible all day long but unless we become part of Jesus no fruit will appear. Jesus spoke of those areas of the vine not producing fruit.

This calls for honesty. Not, as some seem to think, honesty about the lack of applied Christianity in others. The fruit of the Gospel in our lives will be apparent to strangers, to friends and neighbours and not least, to ourselves.

What is required is that we actually need to follow Jesus’ example of caring about those who are not necessarily deserving of our care. We need to be peacemakers, not just in theory, but acting in defusing actual disputes. We need to identify and challenge injustice. Above all we need to be serving others.

Jesus’ point that the branches will have weaker parts reminds us that we all may have weaknesses and what is required is not so much judgment of others, as helping one another overcome our weaknesses.

Jesus reminds us that we have to be ruthless in dealing with weaknesses that get in the way of producing fruit.

Nowhere does he say only in other people.

We see and hear so much about judgement and abuse of others. Whether it be to do with race, ethnicity, sexuality, abortion or many others.

Sometimes by people claiming to be Christians.

It's a good exercise spending a few moments at home making a list of all the people that Jesus rejected.

Metaphors are notoriously difficult to interpret.

Whether or not these 'I am' metaphors help us to make a difference will ultimately depend on whether or not we truly believe Jesus' teaching is for us in the setting of a real world.

If there was ever good news it has to be good news for the life we and others live.

The true vine produces the fruit. May others find in us the evidence of that true vine. The real evidence being the Fruit of the Spirit.

May we be blessed as others feel blessed by us.