

10p

The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 19th October 2003
by Mark Ashton

John 15:1–8

‘Apart from me you can do nothing’

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will 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.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

1) The True Vine

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” (John 15:1a). We reach what must be the most familiar passage of these chapters of John’s Gospel: where Jesus was talking with His disciples the night before He was crucified. But the very familiarity of these words must not stop us understanding how they would have struck those eleven frightened men when they were first spoken all those years ago. Because the image of the vine and of the vineyard was well established in Israel’s religious history, as we will see if we look at Isaiah chapter 5, for example: *‘The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of His delight’* (Isaiah 5:7a). Or we could look at Jeremiah or Ezekiel, or Hosea, or Psalm 80. It is a frequent image and each time this image was used about God’s people in the centuries before the coming of Jesus Christ, it was used in a disappointed way because God’s people were not producing the fruit God required of them. So how does that passage from Isaiah 5 end?—*‘The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of His delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.’* (Isaiah 5:7).

Theology more than horticulture

So when Jesus said, “I am the true vine” it was more a theological comparison He was making than a horticultural one. And it was both an enormous claim, and actually an encouraging one. *“I am the true vine ... ”* Because all God’s Chosen People had failed to do and to be over all the centuries that God had been dealing with them, Jesus would now do and be. It was not to be a failure after all. There was a true, genuine authentic vine. And it was the man beside them at that moment. He would produce all that God required of the human race. So it is an enormous claim, and an encouraging one. It’s not going to be failure after all!

God did not just suddenly spring Jesus on the human race. He came at a particular point in God’s dealings with us. And He fitted exactly on to all that God had done up until that time. Up until that time the people God had chosen to work with had failed. Not only had they failed to produce the harvest of righteousness which God required in the past, they were now failing to recognise His one and only Son, Jesus.

So in its first context, the beginning of verse 2, *‘He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,’* is the situation of the Jews of Jesus’ day: religious people who assumed they were part of what God was doing; that they were in the vine, as it were, and who discovered that they were not. Whatever God does, man quickly perverts. Just as there were Jews who had turned those Old Testament promises of God, which were to be trusted in faith, into a man-centred religious

system, so there are religious people today who claim to belong to Jesus Christ, but show none of the fruits He requires.

It is always the religious who are the most opposed to Jesus. There is one university city I know of where a young man is seeking this term to establish a Bible-teaching church to reach the students with the gospel. And he is facing fierce opposition. Does it come from the criminal element in that town? No. Does it come from the city council in that town? No. Does it come from the university authorities in that town? No. It comes from the clergy. And, I may say, the clergy of the same denomination to which he himself belongs. Beware Christless religion. There is a Christianity without Christ. It is all to do with form and appearance and outward observance with no inward reality. I know, because I was there for 20 years of my life. ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will 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.***

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (vv. 1-5).

2) The Vine-growing Process (verses 1-8)

a) A vine-dresser – God the Father (v. 1)

First we notice there is a vine-dresser, a gardener: ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He 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”*** (vv. 1, 2). God the Father undertakes the care of the true vine. He supervises the health of the branches. It was His loving will to send His Son to earth to bring human beings back into relationship with Himself. He longs for us more than we long for ourselves, more than we long for Him. He cares about us, more than we care about Him, more than we care about ourselves. I think that’s an astonishing thought. I know how much Mark Ashton loves Mark Ashton; and the thought is astonishing that there is someone who loves me more than I love myself: the Gardener, the Father.

b) Pruned branches (vv. 2, 3, 7)

“He 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (vv. 2, 3). I’m going to assume that we’re all familiar with pruning: what I am calling a painful process for a loving purpose: cutting back a living organism in order that it may grow more vigorously. Notice that this is something that the word of God does to us. That’s the point there of verse 3: ***“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”*** Pruning (v. 2) and being made clean (v. 3) are the same Greek word. The disciples have been listening and responding to Jesus’ teaching, and it has gone to work inside them. It has brought them to life, in fact. Glance on to verse 7, and you will see it at the beginning of the verse.

Spiritual life depends on God’s word, just as physical life depends on food. The is exactly how Jesus Himself expressed it: ***“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God”*** (Matthew 4:4). In other words, as you are sustained physically by the Sunday lunch you eat on Sundays, so you and I are sustained spiritually by the words of God. Do we think we can live without them? Then we are wiser than Jesus: ***“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.”*** And as God’s word brings spiritual life to us, so it also maintains and nourishes and cultivates spiritual life in us. ***“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness”*** (2 Timothy 3:16). That’s how we are pruned by God’s word as it teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains us in righteousness. And is it any surprise that we find it hard to read our Bibles? I’m going to work on the assumption that everyone in this building to some extent finds it hard to read the Bible. If it isn’t you, you are welcome to go to sleep at this point. I think it’s most of us who find it hard to read the Bible – why? I don’t suppose that rose bushes, when they see the gardener approaching with his secateurs at the ready, giggle with glee and chortle with delight at the prospect of what’s going to happen to them. Nor do I enjoy the prospect of being taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness. And I dare to think you don’t either. And if that is what is going to happen to me when I open my Bible, I’d better open it with care. Perhaps I ought to take the sort of deep breath before I read the Scriptures, that I take before stepping under a cold shower or sitting down in the dentist’s chair.

Let me just talk for a moment to one or two of us who may say that we do find it moderately easy to read the Bible: perhaps we’d better be quite sure we’re really letting God’s word do His work in us. I am the sort of obsessively routine person who does not find it particularly difficult to set aside a regular time (in fact I feel all wrong if I don’t). I get in a bad temper if my routine gets in any way upset (as my family will tell you). And the very routine predisposes

me to think that I already know what God is going to say so me: *I have my quiet time every day; I know exactly what I am going to read or what I am going to hear.* If I'm not careful, I may still be silencing God's voice, unless I am prepared for Him to say something surprising and unexpected and disturbing every day. And we don't enjoy being disturbed, we don't enjoy being disconcerted. But if my Bible reading does not bring me some pain, then God is not pruning evil in my life. If our Bible reading is not causing us some discomfort, then it is not the Living God we are encountering. But if it is pruning our lives, then we know God is at work inside us: ***"He 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will 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"*** (vv.) Skip to verse 7: ***"If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . ."*** In the very pain lies the comfort, for only the living feel pain.

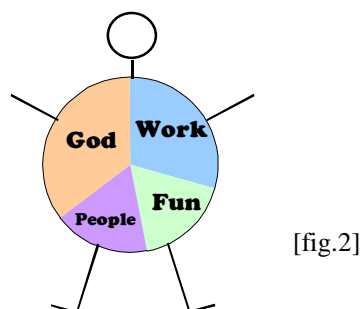
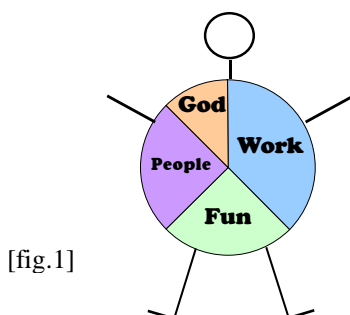
c) Dead branches (v. 6)

"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit . . . If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (vv. 2a, 6). A non-fruit-bearing branch would jeopardise the claim of Jesus to be the true vine: ***"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit."*** I know there are two sorts of pruning activities. Now gardeners here will have to be patient with me, because I am 'horticulturally challenged' (as many of you know). But I think there are two sorts of pruning: the sort we've already referred to, the trimming of a living branch to make it grow better; but there is also the removal of a dead branch because it is dead. That's the sort of thing we are concerned with here. That is the sort of pruning that I find easier. I don't quite know what to do to a living rose bush to make it better, but I can spot a dead branch or bough or twig and I can cut it off. I get a lot of satisfaction from doing that, in my simple gardening. You don't cut it out to kill it, you cut it out because it's already dead. That's what Jesus is talking of in this activity of God. And it must be a serious warning (I'm sorry to turn to it, but it is so strong in this passage). You see, in any gathering like this there always those who are not yet Christian, and know they are not. And you are most tremendously welcome. It's a tremendous privilege to have you with us; we are delighted that you are here. This warning is not for you. But there will also be those who claim that they are Christian but know none of the reality, none of the fruitfulness of the Christian life. They do not remain in Christ, and His words do not remain in them: and you I must warn. If I could see from where I stand at the moment that the gallery was about to fall, and it was going to come crashing down; and I was the only person who had that perspective – I would be guilty to the end of my days if I didn't tell you it was about to happen.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (vv. 5, 6). There is only one sort of Christian life according to Jesus Christ. It is to be in Christ and to have Christ in us. So let's look, finally, at that particular issue by revisiting Pizza Man.

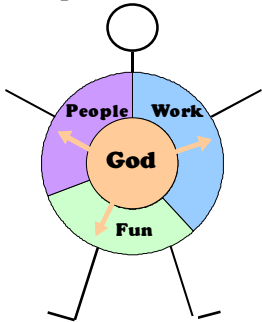
3) Pizza Man Revisited (vv. 4-8)

Pizza Man was a brilliant illustration used by the morning preacher a couple of weeks ago. God has a share in the religious person's life. [fig.1] There's no question about that. And from time to time they get a bit more religious: they hear a sermon that moves them and they decide they are going to give a bit more of their life to God. God gets a bigger share of Pizza Man's life. [fig.2]



a) Christ living in us (vv.4-7)

Now I don't know if either of those would represent your life. But neither of them portray the Christian life. The Christian life would have to be represented like this. [fig.3] It's not a part of us we offer to God. It is being indwelt by the Spirit of God: Christ living in us and living through us in every part and area of our lives. No longer can I bring God tribute, as a Christian: because I am the tribute. And every part of me is not me any longer: it is Him. And so this 'bearing much fruit', referred to here in verse 5 and verse 8, is the normal Christian life. The Bible doesn't know anything of super saints, the sort of highly spiritual ones who get very involved; and the 'normal' rest of us. It is the normal Christian life. It is Christ living in us and bringing glory to the Father through us. And it will happen as our characters are changed into what God wants them to be, and as God works through us to do the things He wants to do in His world. It's all about closeness to Jesus, remaining in Him and letting Him remain in us.



[fig.3]

I tend to think of Christian service as something I go and do for Jesus. So I report back at the end of the day, like an S.A.S. mission: 'Target achieved: mission accomplished' (or if it's been a bad day, 'Lot of enemy fire: had to abort'), a sort of report back on how I have done. But the Christian life is actually from the inside out. We don't just do things for Him and report back to Him. It's not about that. It's about living in Christ and letting Him live in us. And only in that way can we make sense of the two verses with which our passage ends.

b) Asking for glory (vv. 7, 8)

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." The right Pizza Man diagram is needed if we're ever going to understand that sort of praying: ". . . ***ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.***" So that what we want is what God wants, and our lives begin to be lived to His glory. I don't know if it all sounds very remote to you, let me end with this story that I came across this week.

There was a man called Peter Cameron Scott. He and fifteen other missionaries arrived at Mombasa in 1895. A year later (1896), one week before he died, Scott wrote this in his diary as he watched the people sacrificing a goat: 'They have a hazy idea about God, but how far from the truth!' I think he then quoted a couple of lines from a hymn: 'Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high, can we to men be nighted, the lamp of life deny.' And then he wrote this: 'Here I am - use me, in life or death.' And God did. One week later he was dead. One year later of those sixteen missionaries, one remained – the rest had died or gone home. One hundred years later (in 1995) 25,000 Kenyans gathered in Nairobi to celebrate 100 years of God's Word in Kenya through the Africa Inland Church founded by Peter Cameron Scott in 1895. They stood in silence to remember the work, and then they sang, "To God be the glory, great things He has done." Here was a prayer breathed out by a man a week before he died: 'Here I am, use me in life or death.' And God brought his glory about on this earth through the work he and many, many others did.

God is the Gardener. He makes the vine grow. And it grows in and through me, as I remain in the Father and His words remain in me. And the challenge for you and I today is will we remain and let it grow – will we be used by God as He has used Jesus' people down the years?

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)