

TALK FOR EASTER 5B 2021

One of the things that I enjoyed very much when we were in France was to see the vineyards, especially in Epernay where the champagne grapes are grown. One year we went later in the year and saw the grapes harvested and great lorry loads tipped into the crusher. The end result was good too!

In Biblical times vines were also very important. The ground needed to be prepared and the plants nurtured, with the vines two metres apart to allow for growth. They were pruned and trained in different ways. The branches which were cut off were useless because the wood is too soft for it to be used for anything and so can simply be destroyed by burning. The branches which remained were strong and bore fruit. Sometimes the bunches of grapes were so large that they were carried on a staff between two men. The vineyards were often guarded by watch towers and vines were one of the seven species God gave to Israel in the promised land. Wine was not for pleasure but was often drunk with the stale water from the cisterns.

The vines were also used symbolically for God's people of Israel. The fruitful vine represented obedience to God but Jeremiah showed the other side. He wrote in ch 2 v 21: I planted you like a choice vine from the very best seed. But look what you have become! You are like a rotten, worthless vine. Didn't mince his words about Israel's wickedness!

So the Jews were familiar with the symbolism of the vine and here we have Jesus saying that he is the true vine and we are the branches and can either be fruitful or be cut off. What a terrible picture of being cut off from Christ!

The word which stands out in the reading we heard from St John is abide. It is used eight times in the few verses and has a great impact. It has several meanings: to bear, tolerate; to withstand; to await; to accept without objection. When Jesus asks us to abide in him he is inviting us to remain in a deep relationship with him, to accept his invitation. It is a most beautiful invitation!

I am the true vine is one of the seven I am sayings of Jesus. I am the way, the truth and the life, the gate and the good shepherd among the others. He states that we are the branches and we have the choice as to whether we are useless or fruitful. We can refuse his invitation, we can accept it and pay lip service to him or we can run away from him. How often do we do these things?

So how do we abide in him? Jesus spent much of his time in solitary places with his Father and refreshed both his relationship with his Father and gained strength for what was happening in his life. To maintain our relationship with Christ we need to make time to be with him. Relationships do not flourish unless the effort is made to keep in touch and that is what it is like with Christ. Prayer can be difficult and some say that we should only pray when we feel like it! W.E.Sangster quotes Forbes Robinson as saying : Do not mind about feelings... We do not want to feel better and stronger; we want to be better and stronger. We would not miss an appointment with a friend so how can we be less courteous to our Lord?

We must also be ready for the pruning fork. If we look at our innermost selves we will probably see a very murky looking place where there is much that needs to be sorted out. We cannot do that on our own because it is too easy to continue as we always have; we like a quiet life. That is not what Christ offers us but he offers us so much more.

We are now at the 5th week of Easter and we need to sustain that experience of utmost joy we shared on Easter Sunday. The Sunday after Easter is known as Low Sunday because it almost seems like an anti-climax and as Easter fades it is too easy to slip back into our old ways. But Jesus offers us great love to help us retain the momentum. He invites us to abide in him, to remain in his love and that involves obedience. We stray far from him and so we must allow him to prune out whatever is bad in our lives and accept that, knowing that he loves each one of us more than we will know. Let us accept his command to abide in him and he in us.

Risen Lord, you are the true vine and we are the branches. By your Spirit, produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, and patience in us for others to taste and enjoy. Keep us from hanging on to love for ourselves. Prune all selfishness from us and fill us with your love. Amen.