



A sermon preached at
St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Darren McFarland

Reading: John 15.1-8

Those of you who know something of my television watching habits are aware that part of my day off is used to binge on the week's Eastenders! But that's not my only passion. At the moment I am using Sunday lunchtime to catch-up with Gardener's World. It's only since I took possession of the Vicarage Garden that I was introduced to gardening on such a scale and I often feel Monty understands my issues, although his garden seems to be the size of a couple of football pitches. There is of course always the danger that you can be left feeling a little inadequate as you realise that Monty has been up to all sorts of things behind the scenes for months and never seems to have to dash to the garden centre for more compost.

My father was a prolific gardener and I was taught from a very young age by him and the nature table at school that if you plant the seed from fruit it will sprout and you will get a new vine from a grape seed or a new tree from an apple seed, and each will eventually fruit. Right? Wrong! Or sort of right and wrong! If you want a strong vine or tree, and if you want to get a decent amount of fruit from either, then you don't go about it by planting a seed. You might strike it lucky of course. But the chances of doing so are actually very low. The seed will grow, but the plant you get won't be true to type. Plant a seed from a nice sweet grape and you are just as likely to get a vine with grapes which are sour and bitter. So, what do the expert vine and fruit growers do? The answer is they bring two different plants together and join, or graft, one into the other. You use the roots of one plant – called the root stock – and the top growth or branches from another – the scion. According to the Royal Horticultural Society web site this grafting is a complicated and quite lengthy process. They suggest no less than 11 stages which you have to go through in order to get it to work.

And if you read on you will discover that if you grow only from the root stock, without grafting in branches, you might just be luck and get a vigorous plant. But it will be all growth and little fruit. All leaves and no grapes. For a decent crop of fruit the advice is graft two plants together, or save yourself a lot of effort and buy them from a garden centre!

But enough of horticulture, what about our gospel today. Jesus says, "I am the vine: you are the branches." John's gospel contains seven of these sayings by Jesus, which begin 'I am'. 'I am'... - the bread of life - the light of the world - the door of the sheep - the good shepherd - the resurrection and the life - the way, the truth and the life and lastly – the true vine. The

author of John's gospel uses these words to describe who Jesus is and what he offers to those who believe in him. Now as we know a good picture or image is extremely powerful in getting an idea over and helping it lodge in the mind. Here we have the perfect example of that. 'I am the vine: you are the branches' Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. No obtuse or hidden meaning here.

But what are we being taught?

First, that each of us is an individual branch on the vine. And as branches we draw our spiritual strength and energy from and through Christ. It's as if Jesus is the root stock. And up through the roots comes the moisture and sustenance to feed the branches. And it is this feeding that is needed if the branches are to bear fruit. Without that attachment, without the energy that comes up, the branch will just wither and die. And it is with this strength and spiritual energy that we will bear fruit.

Second we are taught that there are many branches of a vine. It would be a poor vine or fruit tree with just one branch. We are, together, the branches of the vine, the branches of the tree. And what is true for us as individual Christians is true for us as a community of Christians, the church. As the Church we draw our nourishment and energy and strength through Christ and we bear fruit. Plant a seed from a grape and it will grow. Stick a branch in the ground and with a bit of luck it will grow as well. But without being grafted onto the root stock it will be all leaf and no fruit. Or it will not be true to type. The grapes will be sour not sweet. The apples will be cookers not eaters. And so that is the challenge to us individually and as a church community this morning. To ask ourselves – how fruitful are our lives? This strength and spiritual sap or energy comes from our knowledge of the life of Christ, and reflecting on his teaching, through study of the bible, and through the sacraments of the church. Today in this Eucharist we are fed by Word and Sacrament and given the power and the energy to go out into the world and live lives that proclaim God's love.

But it is not all fruit and growth in the reading of course. I have neatly side-stepped the more tricky verse 2. "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." We all know that we need to prune out the bad stuff, all the diseased or dead wood, and all the branches that cut across others. And we can probably think of things in our lives which we think and say and do which are less than healthy. And that's the stuff that the Christian life challenges us to prune, to literally cut out!

And the imagery continues, for Jesus reminds us that in the garden we also prune back last year's new growth, by about a third, to a new bud. And this will encourage new side shoots and spurs and on these you will get your fruit not in the first year's growth, but on the second. You only get a good yield of fruit from branches which have been pruned back, and which have come through a winter. One of the oldest, and perhaps the biggest, grape vine in the UK grows at Hampton Court. Planted in 1769 it now measures 12 feet around the base with the longest spur being 120 feet long. It still fruits, each year producing around 600 pounds of black grapes. And the secret? Lots of care and attention to how it is pruned and fed.

If we are to bear the fruits of the spirit, and if the crop of fruit is to be abundant, we must open ourselves to the pruning away of that which is unhealthy or harmful or in our lives, and then

we must be fed. We must draw our energy, our spiritual sustenance and inspiration from Christ himself in worship, in word and sacrament and in prayer.

We must remain joined to the one true vine – to the one who gives us life.

Alleluia. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 06 May 2018, the Fifth Sunday of Easter