

Sunday 2nd May – Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

We are now more than halfway through the Easter season and our gospel readings are taking us through the “I am” sayings in the Gospel according to John. These are all word pictures Jesus uses to help his listeners understand something of who he is and what he has come to do. Today’s saying is part of the Farewell Discourse – the long speech that Jesus makes to his disciples gathered together for the Last Supper just hours before Jesus’ arrest.

Jesus said, “I am the true vine.” His disciples would all have known what a vine looked like. They were a familiar part of the landscape. We know what vines look like too. We may have seen them on holiday in Italy or Spain or we can just go up to Coggeshall and take a look at the vineyard there. Some of you may even have a vine in your garden. It is a familiar image that Jesus uses to help us understand an important truth.

He is the vine and his Father is the vine-grower. It is the vine-grower’s responsibility to look after the vine, to make sure it has the right conditions in which to grow: the right kind of soil, enough water, space to grow, pruning at the right time. The whole point of growing vines is to produce grapes. A vine that doesn’t produce fruit isn’t much use. And that’s where we come in, for we are the branches of this vine. We are the ones who have to bear the fruit. If we don’t, we might find ourselves being pruned.

So what kind of fruit is Jesus talking about? What are we supposed to be doing? Remember, Jesus said all this to his disciples at the Last Supper. He had already knelt down to wash their feet and that told them that the new commandment he was giving them was to love one another. He had also been speaking to them about the Holy Spirit. After the resurrection, Jesus would be sending them out to be witnesses to what they had seen and heard and to spread the gospel to every nation. The fruit he wanted them to bear was to do with their calling to fulfil these tasks. They were to love and to tell others about God’s love. It is the same task that we as Christians have now: to love one another and to tell other people that God loves them and longs for them to belong to God’s people. This is what we are supposed to be doing. It is the fruit Jesus is hoping we will bear.

But to do that, we have to stay connected to Jesus. If a branch falls off the vine, it isn’t going to produce any grapes. It is through the vine-stem that the branches get water and nutrients from the soil. It is through Jesus that we are spiritually fed and this is what enables us to bear fruit. So how do we stay

connected to Jesus? By talking to him, praying, listening for what he might have to say to us through the Bible, when we are praying, in our daily lives and through other people. We stay connected by meeting with others to worship if we can and by learning as much as we can about what Jesus said and did so that we can make sure our lives are shaped by Jesus' values.

Of course, this doesn't mean that people who are not Christians can't love anybody. That would be nonsense. But Jesus said that it would be by their love for one another that people would be able to recognise Christian communities. Most people love their families and friends and can maybe manage to be quite nice to their work colleagues and neighbours. We are called to love everybody in the church as if they were family, even the people we don't always agree with or find a bit annoying. That's not always easy. And we are also called to tell other people about Jesus. That's not always easy either and it's not something you find people who aren't Christians doing very often.

The whole point of a vine is to produce grapes. The whole point of the church is to be a community where people love one another and then go out to tell others that God loves them too. If we are not doing that, we are like dead branches that need to be pruned so the rest of the vine can grow. That's a bit of a sobering thought, isn't it?

We had planned to hold a Vision Day last summer to talk together about the life of our church and what things it might be important to be doing in the next few years. All of that has had to be put on hold. Now, as things are slowly starting to open up again, we are going to need to make some decisions, as a church, about what to re-start, what to let go and what new things we might do. Those decisions need to be based on staying connected to the vine and on producing fruit. What can we do that will help people to stay connected to Jesus and to grow in their faith? What are we doing that shows that we love one another? And what are we doing to help other people in our community come to know that God loves them too? Over the next few months, answering these three questions will need to be the focus of our discussions in our Church Council meetings and in our conversations with one another.

May the Father, the vine-grower, keep us rooted in Jesus, the true vine, fill us with his love, pour the Holy Spirit upon us and send us out into the world to live and proclaim our faith.