

EASTER 5 – 2021

Acts 9:26-31

1Jn 3:18-24

Jn 15:1-8

A common image of God's people Israel in the Old Testament is that of a vineyard, fig or olive tree. Jesus uses this image and said that Israel was a vineyard that had yielded a poor harvest despite God lavishing his love on it. In today's gospel reading, St John reflects on this and sees Jesus Christ, not Israel, as the vineyard that God has planted. All the things said by the Old Testament prophets about the Children of Israel were fulfilled in Jesus who is God's true Vine. St John develops this metaphor when he says that the vine becomes the 'whole' Christ, namely Christ as the head together with his disciples as the branches. This is like St Paul's image of the body with Christ as the head and the faithful as its member parts.

Let's imagine a stony hillside in the Middle East where plants struggle to grow. A farmer brings in topsoil and plants a vine. He sets up a post to support it and provides horizontal supports for its branches. He fences it to protect it from goats and as it grows he trains it and in autumn he prunes it back. The vine depends on the farmer for its life, but equally the farmer depends on the vine. The vine can do what the farmer cannot do. It can take water from the earth and convert it into grapes, which the farmer can turn into wine. Farmer and vine depend on each other in order for water to be turned into wine.

St John is demonstrating to his listeners that Jesus is the true vine and his Father is the farmer. The vine with its roots in the earth depends on the farmer so that every branch will produce bunches of grapes that will be crushed and bring joy to those who drink its wine.

The life of the vine flows through every branch. We have to be part of Christ to produce fruit. Any branch that is cut off from him withers and dies. In him, his truth and life flows through us. No other fruit tree produces grapes that can be turned into wine, just as no-one comes to the heavenly banquet with the Father except through being part of Jesus.

To maintain the health of the vine, branches must be pruned. The Greek word for 'cut off' is *harein*; the word for 'cut back' is *katharein* which literally means to be purified or made clean. Unfruitful branches are cut off, fruitful ones are pruned back or purified. This is the process of removing those things that prevent the love of God from flowing through us and so enable his life to produce new fruit through us. This is what Jesus means when he says, "Dwell in my love."

Love flows from the deep source which is the Father. If we live as a person who knows we are loved, then Jesus' command to love one another will live in our hearts as a known and lived experience, so love is able to flow through us and beyond us through everything we do and say.

St John tells us that Jesus delivered this teaching about himself being the True Vine during the Last Supper so Jesus is emphasising that the unity between himself and his Church is

essential and visible *in* and *made real* in the Eucharist or Mass. Equally, unity between Christians is essential. It is not just a nice gesture. Unity between the churches and with Christ is not achieved by Christians assimilating un-Christian secular moral culture. In challenging times we, the faithful of Christ's Church, must not be afraid be counter cultural. We must resist attempts to be 'cancelled' and turned into one of the numerous lifestyle options thrashing about in the fluidity of current western culture. We are called to be faithful to the Way of the Cross and stand firm in the Faith, whatever the cost.

Msgr Harry Entwistle

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