

**Sunday 3 May 2015**

**Reading:** John 15:1-8 (NT Page 1083)

## **BACKGROUND**

There are a few things in this text that are not only striking, but also need some explanation. In the Gospel of John we find 7 “I am sayings” where Jesus said:

- I am the bread of life;
- I am the light for the world;
- I am the door;
- I am the good shepherd;
- I am the resurrection and the life;
- I am the way, the truth and the life.

In John 15 Jesus says “I am the true vine”. But in this Chapter “I am” refers both to Jesus and God the Father. This is quite significant because it directs us to the whole intention of this chapter and the previous one namely Jesus as being one with God the Father. Jesus says that He is the vine, the mediator between the Gardener, God the Father and the branches, his disciples. If they (his disciples) bear fruit it will be to the glory of God the Father.

The metaphor that Jesus uses is also quite significant. In the Old Testament and in post Biblical times the vine is frequently used as a symbol for Israel and usually as a symbol of a disobedient Israel that has become wild and dried up. The only thing left to do with it is to burn it with fire. In both John 15 and in the Old Testament texts, the Lord God is viewed as the vinedresser or gardener. But unlike the Old Testament texts where Israel is the vine, Jesus is now the vine. He stands between the gardener and the branches. It is also not the vine, Israel that is under judgment but the branches, his disciples. It is also just in the Gospel of John that Jesus is portrayed as the vine. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus uses the vine and vineyard in his parables, but never referred to himself as the true Vine.

In chapter 15, the emphasis is also on identity. The disciples are the branches. They cannot bear fruit on their own without the presence of

Jesus. They belong to Jesus, as the true Vine. They are not God. The Gospel of John wants to make sure that the disciples understand that they are different from the Vine and the Gardener. Fruitfulness serves as the test of belonging to Jesus as the Vine. The task of the master gardener, God the Father therefore, is to distinguish between productive and unproductive branches and dealing appropriately with them. The unproductive branches are taken away/removed while the productive branches are cleansed/pruned so that they will become more productive.

The image of burning the dried branches is a judgment motif that goes back to the Old Testament including the plagues of Egypt and the cities and disobedient people who are burned. God's anger is linked to fire, and fire is often used as a symbol of judgment both in the Old and the New Testaments. Unlike olive wood, the cuttings of the vineyard are good for nothing except burning. That was the judgment of Ezekiel when he likened Jerusalem to fruitless vines and that is the judgment of fruitless disciples in this core metaphorical picture of John.

Amen

## **REFLECTION**

This passage is a very powerful one and one that really cannot leave us to go on with our ordinary lives. This passage is asking us if we are the image bearers of Jesus Christ – if we are the branches that are bearing fruit of our faith - If we really portray the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with our lives!

Years ago in South Africa, I was asked by the Moderator and the Assembly Commission to be on a task group to start a dialogue between our Church and our sister Church which was, originally, our mission partner and then became an independent Church. When we turned up for the first meeting we expected to see also a delegation of their Church, but to our surprise their Moderator and his whole leadership team was there to welcome us and meet with us. Because of the political instability we could not meet in the townships, so our meeting was at a venue in the city. All of us felt quite bad. I mean, our Moderator did not think it was important enough to turn up for the meeting. Instead he summoned us. But their Moderator was a

kind and gentle man. He opened our meeting with a reading and a prayer in Afrikaans – not even in English or Tswana his mother tongue. And while he preached, he did not once bad mouth our Church, apartheid, or the fact that the leadership of our Church was in absentia. He preached in such a way that I was moved almost to tears. He preached about love, peace and hope in a way that I never have heard again. And it was in that moment that I saw a true disciple of Jesus, truly a man of God.

I think this is exactly what the Gospel of John is telling us. If we believe, we are, through faith, part of Jesus. And if we say we belong to Him, then other people must be able to see his existence in our everyday living. We must bear the fruit of our faith.

I know a lot of people will then ask, “but what must we do?”. Well, the Bible tells us that we have to live lives of faith, hope, and love in gratitude for what God had done for us. And not only for what he had done but still is doing through his Holy Spirit. We all know what a healthy vine looks like. It has green leaves and bears fruit. In order to have green leaves and fruit it needs a lot of water. We have received the true water namely God’s word that flows through our lives every time we accept it in faith and live by its commandments. If we allow ourselves not to read the Bible we will not be nourished and refreshed. We will dry out and eventually die.

But it does not mean that a green and fruit-bearing vine is free from insects, sickness, and weather conditions. Anyone who is sitting in this Church will know that to keep a vine healthy means hard work. The same is true of our Christian faith. We are not exempt from illness, suffering, sadness, loneliness, and broken relationships. We need to nourish our faith by reading the Bible and by thorough prayer as often as we can. We must think of the Church as a Service Station along the roads we travel:

- A place where we can go in and be ourselves among friends, brothers, and sisters in faith;
- A place of peace where we can escape the violence and the hatred of our world;
- A place where we can find our original roots namely the True Vine;
- A place where we can be nourished and refreshed in our faith;

- A place which is filled with the love of God;
- A place that will provide us with enough spiritual food to travel again through the world;
- A place which reminds us of our enormous duty as people who belongs to the Vine, Jesus Christ.

This passage helps us also to get some perspective on the pruning process. As followers of Jesus we must be thankful of every situation where we learn lessons. God is preparing and pruning us to be branches that bear more fruit to the glory of his name. Maybe it is the process of pruning that will help us to understand why certain things happens to us, why it is not always just honey and roses in our lives...Again if we just ponder on the “why” questions our journeys will be incomplete. We must learn to trust God – He is the Gardener and knows each and every branch in His Vine. He will not let us suffer beyond our power and will. He will make sure that we become what he intended us to be, his followers bearing the fruit of our faith!

If we say we are followers of Jesus then we must have lives of faith to prove it. If we say we are Christians then we must glorify God through our actions of love, hope and faith.

If you are sitting this morning in this Church and feel that you are the branch that is fading fast, close your eyes and pray to God the Gardener to help you find your faith again. If you are feeling as though you are a failure, open your Bible and be nourished by God’s words that say: “I came for the sinners”. If you know of someone that is currently experiencing a lack of faith, go to them today and, with them, pray to God for help and nourishment through his Holy Spirit.

May we as a congregation stand out in this community as Christians, disciples, followers of God who live out what we believe in...

Amen