

I frequently tell people what a privilege I believe it to be to serve 4 such lovely villages in South Cambridgeshire. The countryside around here is lovely, if a little flat, and each of the villages seem to have a genuine sense of community, and the villages seem to have lots of houses with wonderful gardens. Which for me, this morning, is where the problems start. Because I am going to talk to you about pruning – and I suspect there are many people here today who know a lot more about the best way to prune something than I do – but hey – we’ll give it a go!

I have to say that my approach to pruning is usually make it worth the effort. If something needs pruning then a little snip here or there is usually not worth the effort. But then we bought a lovely lavender bush a few years ago, and at the end of the summer I gave it a good prune, and it never grew again. And there are also bushes like leylandii which if you prune too vigorously then that area simply remains a brown area of your tree rather than a neater, smaller version of what you had before.

But then there are shrubs like roses which reward us, year in year out, for having the courage of our convictions and an early spring hard cut back produces a beautifully shaped, abundantly flowering piece of beauty.

So what about vines? The latest in the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus – last week we had ‘I am the good shepherd’, preceded by ‘I am the gate for the sheep’, is, ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.’ We’ll come back to pruning in a minute but first, what does Jesus mean by the ‘true vine’.

The vine is a metaphor frequently used in the Old Testament – but whenever it is used it is used to describe the state of Israel – and pretty much always in a negative sense. From the book of Jeremiah,

‘Yet I planted you as a choice vine from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?’ Jeremiah 2: 21

And then there is this beautiful passage from Psalm 80

You brought a vine out of Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it;

it took deep root and filled the land.

The mountains were covered with its shade,

the mighty cedars with its branches;

it sent out its branches to the sea

and its shoots to the River.

Why then have you broken down its walls,

so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

The boar from the forest ravages it,

and all that move in the field feed on it.

Turn again, O God of hosts;

look down from heaven and see;

have regard for this vine,

the stock that your right hand planted.

It has been burned with fire; it has been cut down;

may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,

the one whom you made strong for yourself.

Then we will never turn back from you;

give us life, and we will call on your name.

Two passages clearly using the vine to represent the nation of Israel turning their back on God.

How a nation can fall apart. Both those pieces from the Old Testament would have been written after the fall of Israel, when those Israelites that were left were living in a different land, yet God did return to them in the end. He restored the vine.

And now Jesus is the new representative of God who won't turn his back on God, the true representative, the true vine.

And my Father is the vinegrower, and he prunes the vine.

So let's go back to pruning and what Jesus is talking about. 'He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.'

That could sound a little brutal – if you don't come up with the goods then you were removed? To me that's not what it is really saying.

Some of the 'I am' sayings are really encouraging people to start to follow Jesus – I am the way, the truth and the life, or I am the Good Shepherd, but here Jesus is addressing those people who are already following him, and encouraging them to stay following him, and the pruning is not pruning out followers, it is pruning aspects of us that make us less effective followers.

'You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.' Jesus, teaching us how to live our lives, if we follow what he says, he has cleansed us. That feels good.

'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.'

In those two lovely sentences where Jesus is simply encouraging us to stay connected with him, there is an amazing phrase – 'as I abide in you'. Jesus is living in me, in you. He is not some distant being that we need to go out and find, but if we stay connected to him, then he lives within us. What does that mean.

When Martin Luther fell out with the Catholic Church in the 16th century and posted his famous Ninety-five Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany, the basis behind his disagreement was fairly simple. He disagreed with the Church's policy on Indulgences (paying money to the Church to obtain forgiveness for sins). Only Catholic priests were allowed to read, interpret, and teach the Bible.

The Pope established the only correct way to interpret the scriptures, and all Catholics were bound to follow it. If ever there was a single phrase in the bible that backed up what Martin Luther was saying it is this, 'as I abide in you.'

We have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews makes it clear that because Jesus' life is an indestructible life, 'he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.' Stay connected to Jesus and he will live in you, no one in between you and Jesus. How fabulous is that?

So I really don't think we should be looking at this passage, as I have heard some say, in terms of if you don't do what God says you will be chopped off, you will be separated from God. No, what this is saying is that you are connected to God through Jesus, and what you have to do is to maintain that connection.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is another reading where I want to look at what it says from the other side to which people normally look at it. The story of Philip and Ethiopian court official is one of those stories which we often see as a great encouragement to us to go out and evangelise – to tell people all about Jesus – and yes, of course, doing that is important. But what about this Ethiopian Court Official? Where did he suddenly appear from, why had he come to Jerusalem to worship – Jerusalem and Ethiopia are not exactly on each other's doorsteps?

So who was he? Luke describes him as a eunuch who held office in the Ethiopian Court under the queen, Candace. He was her chief finance minister. It is very unlikely, virtually impossible, that he would himself have been Jewish. But there was something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life which had attracted him, as it did with many other in the ancient world (if you think of the kind of Gods that were worshipped by other nations, and the kind of practices that were often associated with them, you might well see Judaism as a wonderful oasis of clean, calm wisdom). So he made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, perhaps at one of the festivals; and he procured, or perhaps he already possessed, a copy of some or all of the Jewish scriptures. And he came across this passage in what we now know as Isaiah chapter 53, and he wanted to understand what the passage meant – and in particular who this passage referred to. And Philip explained.

You see what it was that Philip explained was how the story of the Jewish nation, of Israel, was turning out. What Jesus disciples had realised, and this was the same outcome that Stephen described in his speech before he was killed by the Jewish Authorities with Paul watching on, was the prophets, of which group Isaiah was a very significant member, had shown where the Nation was going next. They started with Abraham, and God's promise of the promised land for the chosen people, and described what happened to the Jewish nation through its history and created a sort of job description for the person who would be the saviour of the Jewish nation.

And Philip and Stephen and all the others were now explaining Jesus to the world understood that the person that fitted that job description was none other than Jesus. So it was hardly a surprise that our Ethiopian friend was so excited by what he heard and wanted to be baptised.

He believed in the Jewish God, he wanted to share in the death and resurrection of this Jesus, he wanted this amazing story that had been told to him to become his personal story. No wonder he went on his way celebrating – to become, if later tradition is to be believed, the first evangelist in his own native

Readings: Acts 8: 26 - end
John 15: 1-8

Title: Staying close to Jesus

Foxton and Fowlmere

country. But all this happened because he wanted God, or Jesus who he now knew about, to be part of him. He wanted Jesus to live in him. He wanted his life to be transformed.

So two passages with the same message. Whatever you do in your lives; whatever it is that takes up your time, or your energy, remember that Jesus lives in you. Nothing can be more exciting, sometimes more challenging, always more comforting than knowing that.

'I am the vine , you are branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.'

And who would want to do nothing?

Amen