

Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

Our passage falls between Jesus talking with his disciples about his impending betrayal and Jesus being arrested. A beautiful passage that conjures up an image of Jesus and his followers intertwined in a relationship – a relationship where Jesus is the vine, and his followers are the branches that have the potential to bear a lot of fruit. It is a passage that prepares Jesus' disciples for life after his own death and resurrection, and yet speaks about cutting off the very branches Jesus has come to be among. It is a passage that invites us to go back to the original Greek to consider a view that is not easily read from our English translation.

Text

John 15:1–8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Comment

To read this passage without connecting with the feelings and emotions of the disciples at the time these words were spoken would be to underplay the importance of the words of Jesus and our interpretation to these events. It is a message far away from the anxious feelings that we read about in previous chapters of Jesus being troubled in Spirit, and Judas leaving the group to go and betray Jesus. Here Jesus gives this beautiful image of becoming interdependent and intertwined with him – a lasting relationship for those who bear much fruit. It must have been reassuring for the disciples to hear that they will be connected even more closely to Christ after his death than they were at that moment in time – branches of the vine.

The Gospel writer shows Jesus focussing on the life his disciples are invited to lead after his death and resurrection – a passage of preparation for what will be. The passage is often read about who is, and who isn't, a disciple of Christ – and to encourage Jesus' disciples to bear abundant fruit in the days that will follow his death and resurrection. But what about those who do not meet this expectation of bearing a lot of fruit? Does this passage really mean that only those who achieve this status of being 'profitable' for Christ are ok? That the rest will be removed and cast aside? It raises some questions about what happens to those who fall short of this expectation or indeed reject the need for Christ. Had Christ not come for those who fall short and to bring all humankind to himself?

We read that 'He removes every branch that bears no fruit'. There are times in most people's lives that are tougher than others. Times when we may be unable to give, times when we need to be held by the love of others. At these times we are likely to bear less fruit. Not all the disciples were producing the abundant fruit that Jesus is speaking about. Jesus has, for example, just told Simon Peter that he will deny knowing him (John:14:38). In the original Greek the English interpretation for 'cut off' can also mean to be raised up. If we read this verse as the branches which bear no fruit will be raised up – we have a significantly different perspective and meaning to the words spoken by Jesus.

Meeting a minister I asked how he was doing – 'surviving' was the short reply. At such times we need those around to hold us up – to raise us from our current place. Reading the passage through this lens means that such a person is not cut off from the vine – but rather a more precious picture emerges – that of being raised up by those who surround us. For the branches that lie on the ground produce smaller and far less fruit than those who are higher off the ground.

Barbara Glasson speaks of 'sur vivre' – to live above a story of abuse. To be raised up. 'Sur vivre is not about pure survival, a desperate attempt to keep one's head above water, but rather speaks of a process of flourishing... about seeing the world differently and finding possibilities for all of us to live in a new way' p2.* The alternative, as suggested by Barbara Glasson, is 'sous vivre' – to live below or underneath. Reading John 15:2 as being raised up – or to live above, rather than removed, brings the possibility of transformation and ultimately bearing more fruit. This is a reading of inter-dependent relationships, each person looking out for and caring for others – holding up those who are in need, and being prepared to be held ourselves at other times.

The passage now reads of a God that works with and holds those who are in pain and conflict – a God that works to restore health and transform lives. Not a God who cuts off those in pain and discards them. In the context of this passage, speaking about the world beyond Christ's death and resurrection – it brings a message of resurrection for all who seek it. I am the true vine and you are the branches – a picture of total transformation for those in all walks of life – those who are thriving, those who are 'sur vivre,' and those who feel they have no hope. A picture of the Gospel message we see repeated in John's gospel – a God who loves, saves and journeys with us whatever our context.

* Glasson, Barbara (2009), *A Spirituality of Survival*, Continuum.

What is the picture of your life at this moment in time? Are you a branch that is producing a lot of fruit? What areas do you need to pay attention to? What areas of your life is God pruning back and how are you reacting to this?

Are you struggling in life? Is there a difficult situation or trauma that you are sitting with. Do you feel like you are going under and being trampled on? How might you be lifted up? When we are able to 'sur vivre' we find a transformation that seems impossible when we 'sous vivre'. We are able to live again be productive.

Where is the fire in your life? Are you able to harvest the heat and the warmth to produce new growth? What does this look like?

Prayer

Jesus, as our lives intertwine with yours
Let us hold fast to our relationship with you
When the going is good
 let the fruit of our lives be plentiful
When the going is tough
 let us allow others to hold us up
When we feel like we are drowning
 Let us find the fire that produces the much needed heat and energy
At all times, we ask that the fruit we produce be a blessing to all

Amen.