

SERMON FOR 10TH FEBRUARY 2012 – JOHN 15 verses 1 - 8

On Sunday mornings we are on a journey exploring the theme of Discipleship – what being a disciple of Christ means in practice and we have arrived at John Chapter 15 (page 1022).

Last week we considered the example of Mary in John Chapter 12 when she poured the costly perfume over the feet of Jesus as an act of extravagant giving and gratitude for what Christ had done – challenging us to consider just how we should express our own gratitude to Christ in practical and tangible ways.

The opening words of John 12 are “Six days before the Passover” – and by the beginning of John 13 we have arrived at the Passover meal and we are just hours away from the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

During the Passover meal Jesus shocked the disciples by getting up, putting a towel around his waist and washing their feet.

He then declared He had set an example that his disciples are to follow.

There were more shocks to follow this.

First Jesus predicted his betrayal – He gave Judas the bread, who then got up and left the room. Jesus then told the remaining disciples that He was going away – the time had come for Him to leave them. Peter declared that he would go with Him and was willing to follow Jesus anywhere – even lay down his life if necessary. Jesus responded by telling Peter that he would deny that he even knew who Jesus was before the dawn arrived.

At this the disciples were confused and fearful – at this point they needed words to strengthen and encourage them. They received that encouragement from Jesus and it is recorded for us in Chapters 14 – 17. In chapter 14 He comforts the disciples by telling them that though He must leave, the Holy Spirit would come and reveal truth, bring comfort and be an advocate and helper in his absence. In John 15 Jesus teaches about the outworking of the Holy Spirit in the believers life.

This chapter will be our focus for the next three weeks – starting with the opening eight verses where Jesus gives the illustration of Him being a vine and us being the branches and the resultant fruit that should be evident in the life of any disciple of Christ where the Holy Spirit is at work.

READ JOHN verses 1 – 8.

Having lived over 30 years in an urban setting I have to confess that agricultural metaphors don't come naturally to me and I cannot claim to be a gardener.

However, they came naturally to Jesus. When – as here – Jesus uses the image of his Father as the gardener and Him as the vine it wasn't because He was wandering down the street in Jerusalem and noticed some spectacular vines for which it is famous - and then suddenly felt inspired to use them as an illustration.

No, He knew he was using a “metaphor of history” – and with this illustration He was digging deep back into the psyche of Israel.

It is something His original hearers would have been very familiar with.

For example, over the temple porch in Jesus' day you would have noticed a golden vine trailing as a sign of God's provision and abundant grace to them. When Israel revolted against Rome and minted their own coinage they put a vine onto the coins as a symbol of their identity. The vine was a potent symbol.

The Old Testament is full of allusions to Israel as a vine. Read the Psalms and the Prophets and there are lots of references. For example – here is a quote from the prophet Ezekiel:

“You were planted by God in good soil by abundant water so that you would bear fruit and become a splendid vine” God's purpose was that Israel would respond to His abundant love and bear fruit – meaning that they would show and demonstrate in tangible ways that they were indeed God's people.

How?

By obeying His commands and reflecting His character to the surrounding nations.

But, sadly and tragically, we read that Israel failed in this task and calling.

To stay with the illustration the roots started growing in the wrong direction and Israel followed after other idols which yielded only “bad fruit”. By the end of the Old Testament we find a complaining – complacent- compromised people who had broken faith with God and each other.

Then we turn over the page - and 400 years – and come to the New Testament - where Jesus Himself takes and transforms this illustration of the vine.

When He declared "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener" His listeners would have linked immediately what He was saying back to the Old Testament prophets. When He Goes on to say "I am the vine...You are the branches...And you are to bear much fruit" it was a remarkable thing to say. He was effectively declaring that followers of Jesus – His disciples – are the New Israel – and are, once again, called to bear fruit for God and His Kingdom.

If you claim to be a believer in and a disciple of Jesus the calling is clear from this passage – you have been appointed to go and bear fruit – actually much fruit – and this is not for the spiritual elite but rather for all disciples. Jesus in this passage does not actually say what the fruit is – he makes no attempt here to define what He meant by it. From His illustration I would suggest it is the outward evidence of the inner life – for fruit is a natural outgrowth – and the growth is related to our inner life. In simplest terms, disciples show who they are by the ways in which their lives show characteristics of Christ Himself and by the way in which we glorify God.

Now, there are many ways this fruit should be seen and demonstrated in our lives – worth a good discussion! Here are briefly three ways that it should be evident – all taken from other parts of Scripture (and hopefully to help us – all beginning with "P").

The first is proclamation – speaking the gospel and sharing the message of Christ's offer salvation. Taking opportunities when they come in conversations – simply seeking to share what we believe.

As Peter was later to declare in his letter to the church:

"In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord and always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have - but do this with gentleness and respect".

Part of the task of fruit bearing is simply getting the message of Jesus verbally across to others.

The second way we bear fruit is to have a passion for justice – the sharing of God's heart for justice.

Let's go back to the Old Testament and the original context of this illustration which is in the book of Isaiah. In Chapter 5 Israel was introduced as the vine.

There Isaiah proclaimed that God is looking for justice and for righteousness from His people – His people should hear the cries of the weak – should respond to cries of distress and oppression.

Yes, we must be a people who are committed to proclaiming the crucified Christ – and we must also be a people engaged in seeking the righteousness of the Kingdom - revealing and expressing the just heart of our Father creator.

Following "Proclamation" – a "Passion for justice" the third fruit for us to produce and display is that of "Personal holiness".

We are told later in the New Testament that we should all bear the fruit of the Spirit in our character.

There are nine different qualities – can we remember them?

"Love – joy – peace – patience – kindness – goodness – faithfulness – gentleness – self control"

Please note it is the fruit (singular) and not the fruits (plural) – in other words they are separate qualities - but all merged together. Like one of those blended fruit juices that boasts on the carton that you will taste banana – coconut – raspberry – strawberry – mango and a whole range of other fruits – I think they are called "smoothies!"

What we are called to do is to demonstrate the "blended fruit of holiness" in our lives. We are not to be selective and think we are fine with, say, five of them.

No – God's will for us all is that they are all blended together in our personal character.

So you can't say this:

"I am a joyful character – which is why I always love to praise God and I am always able to shout Hallelujah even on the darkest days – and surely all believers should be able to join me in this"

Sometimes those around us need someone to weep with – for, yes, we are called to joy - and we are also called to

gentleness. In our working together – in our relating to one another – God’s will and purpose for us is that all of us demonstrate all of the fruit of the spirit on all occasions.

So fruit bearing is shown and demonstrated by the words on our lips – proclamation – by a heart passion for justice and righteousness and revealed in our attitude and actions which is our personal holiness.

That is just three types of fruit we should be displaying to those around us – there are many more from scripture – but they underline how “lip and life” both must demonstrate that Jesus – by the Holy Spirit – is at work in our hearts.

Which moves me on to the next question and the one I want to mainly focus upon from this passage:

“How is this fruit produced in our lives – how does it grow?”

What is my part - and what is God’s part?

There are two words from two verses that we need to understand as being essential if we are to be fruit bearing disciples:

The first is verse 2 (read it) – PRUNING.

For a vine to bear fruit the dead branches need to be cut. Spiritually speaking, if we want to bear fruit in our lives there is no getting away that it will require a pruning from God.

What does this mean and look like?

I would suggest that the pruning takes many different forms.

Maybe it comes from opposition and conflict – maybe comes from being convicted about certain aspects of our lives that need to change – maybe it comes from the people of God – brothers and sisters in Christ – moulding and shaping and challenging us about certain aspects of our lives that need attention and change. Maybe it comes through the day to day circumstances of life – the failures and disappointments and discouragements and complexities and confusions that drive us to pray.

Pruning is God correcting us and changing us.

It happens because He is not finished with us – and also because God loves us so much that He refuses to leave us the way that we are.

I want us to remember and register this – “Pruning is not punishment.”

Never think that if God lays you low – you are suddenly facing a completely unexpected trial and trouble – it then follows that it is because of something that you have done. God’s pruning is not His getting even with us!

If you think that then listen to the words of Scripture – in this case Psalm 103 but there are many examples:

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His Love for those who fear Him

“As far as the East is from the West (and that is immeasurable!) – So far has He removed our transgressions from us?

As a Father has compassion on His children – so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him”

Yes, the pruning can be painful – but it always has a purpose.

It is because God loves us that he prunes us – it may hurt in the short term but will bring long term gain. We may not enjoy it in the present - but in the context of eternity it will make sense and will have a purpose.

So - Jesus is the vine – our Father is the gardener – we the believers are the branches – the purpose is for fruit that will last.

Be encouraged by this verse further on in the New Testament.

It is from Hebrews Chapter 12 - which is all about how God changes us.

Verse 11 says this:

“No discipline (or pruning) seems pleasant at the time – but painful.

Later on – however – it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace”

Is that not an encouragement?

If so – note the challenge that comes in the next verse:

“Therefore – strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees”

Does that not point to our part in this pruning process?

We need – by God’s grace – to be patient and persevering – in the knowledge that there is a purpose in what we are going through.

Pruning will be painful and our natural instinct is to resist it.

So we must look beyond the here and now if we are to see the fruit grow and ultimately bring glory to God and benefit and blessing to others.

I read a good example – page 160 from Stuart Briscoe’s “Discipleship for ordinary people” (He gave up a good job in the bank to become a preacher – 20 years after writing this book He is still going strong!)

Let’s be encouraged as well as realistic - fruitfulness will come where pruning takes place.

Going to quote you two proverbs – they are not in Scripture but wise nonetheless -

“When all you have is sunshine – all you get is desert”

In other words, don’t despise the tests and trials because of the fruit it could – and should – be bearing in our lives. If we did have all we ask for all of the time – would a Godly character grow and be evident in our lives. I don’t think so.

Another proverb: – “The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay”.

Trials and testing can and should produce a sweetness and maturity – but it is possible to produce bitterness and resentment if we refuse to recognise God’s hand and a purpose. So there is the challenge – if we are to accept the pruning and persevere for we are told God will produce the fruit.

The second way from this passage that fruit that lasts will grow and develop in the life of a disciple: Read verse 4 – REMAINING

“Remain in me” says Jesus.

Of course, it is by grace that we are grafted to Him – but we have a responsibility to stick close.

The word “remain” comes 10 times in this Chapter – it is obviously significant.

What is the reason that He calls us to do this?

He is a person – you are a person – He is interested in a close, vibrant, intimate relationship with you.

You are a Christian – I am a Christian – because the cross has removed the barriers between us and God. The Holy Spirit has bought new life and He is there to strengthen and encourage us.

We are to live and walk in the light of these things.

So how, practically speaking, do we remain?

I believe we have one answer to that is in verse 7 (read it)

Two things are highlighted here – that the words of Jesus remain in us – and that we ask for the help and the resources that we need.

So – the two things that are essential to remaining and therefore to fruitfulness are that we read and come under the Scriptures - and that we pray.

Now, I am sure you have heard this before - it is not new!

But it remains foundational and key to this relationship and thus discipleship.

There is no short cut to this - and I can see no other way by which we are to remain in Him and be fruitful.

We are to be a humble listener to Him through His word in Scripture and – however weak it may seem at times – we are to come and ask and pray from a genuine heart.

In John 15 the context is Jesus about to leave His disciples – his priority in teaching them was that they would learn to remain in Him – and not substitute other things and activities for this relationship with Him.

For us now, “remaining in Christ” is something that we must give ourselves to – something that is intentional – because it is not something that we just drift in to.
It will involve giving ourselves to praise and worship – taking time to read and meditate on God’s word – it will involve prayer, sacrifice and service.
We have to be intentional, active and disciplined in order to “remain”.
There is no easy short cut.
In saying “remain in me” Jesus is speaking of the intimate relationship he and His disciples are to enjoy – and the challenge to us is to play our part in cultivating it. If we try and live our lives without the vine - we will not produce true spiritual fruit but will wither and die inside. That is a warning to us.

But the encouragement – the incentive for us here - is that branches that remain in the vine submit to the pruner’s knife when necessary and live, grow and bear fruit – Jesus even says “much fruit”.
That is the promise here from Jesus that we can take heart and feed from.
Can I also add something to this?
I don’t believe that you can separate remaining in Christ and also remaining in the community of believers – being an active part of the body of Christ.
There is no such thing in the New Testament as a solitary Christian.
We cannot bear fruit without remaining in Christ – or by walking closely with fellow believers and disciples.
We can’t go it alone.
So prayer, praise, worship, learning and applying God’s word has a corporate dimension – why we are here this morning – as well as a personal one where we are in touch and in tune with Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, knowing him and being known by Him.

So, simply, we are called to bear fruit – much fruit and fruit that will last.
The fruit grows through God pruning us, like a gardener treats a vine, and we are to remain in in the vine – which is the person and the Love of Christ.

I want to finish with priority that Jesus underlines here – something that should constantly be moulding our motives both as individuals and as the body of Christ working and serving together.

READ VERSE 8

“THIS IS TO MY FATHERS GLORY”

It must never be about our glory – it must always be about the glory of God.
It is not about my reputation – but His.
It is not about my kingdom – but His.

It is a good point to remind ourselves of the inscription on the stone at the back of the hall.
It declares this - we are here:

“For the Glory of God and for the welfare of this neighbourhood”

That is what we should measure everything we do by – is it for the glory of God? Is the desire to glorify God the highest of all our motives?

Is it the primary reason we do what we do?

Is it what ultimately energises our giving and going out to others?

To glorify Him means to obey Him – for if we Love Him we will obey His commands. This is very clear from John Chapter 15.

And it is clear the most fruitful believer is not the cleverest – or the most gifted – believer. But rather it is the faithful and the obedient believer.

So set your heart upon that - and trust that God will produce the fruit that will bring glory to Him and be a Blessing to others.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. Jesus gives us the illustration that He is the vine, we are the branches and our Heavenly Father is the gardener. Share how you understand the application of this illustration in terms of us growing as a disciple?

If you enjoy gardening - are there any particular helpful insights to share.

2. Our calling is to produce fruit in our lives.

We are told that this must involve two things – “pruning” and “remaining”

In terms of pruning – how do you interpret and understand this?

How may it actually happen?

How might we misunderstand it?

(I asserted that “Pruning is not punishment” – would you agree, from scripture, with that?)

3. Share your understanding of the type of spiritual fruit that should be evident and being produced in our lives?

Add to the list of “Proclamation”, “Passion for Holiness” and “Personal Holiness”.

4. 10 times in John 15 we have the word “remain” – and Jesus in verse 5 declares that “apart from me you can do nothing”.

What does it mean to “remain in Christ” – how do we practically go about doing this?

5. There is a close similarity between the words “disciple” and “discipline”.

Is this a coincidence – or are the two very close relations?

If you think the two are – how can we be disciplined and encourage others to be so without becoming legalistic?

What are the disciplines God gives us to keep us from becoming fruitless?

Share (if appropriate) how you go about instilling these disciplines into your daily/ weekly routines?