

Staying connected with Jesus

7 May 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Our Bible reading today is about **grapes** ...

I happen to have brought some different types of grapes with me today ...

- These ones are little dried grapes called **sultanas**
- These are **fresh grapes** from the supermarket

But the grapes in our Bible story are not like these grapes ... because they're still growing and still connected to one of the branches of the vine that is connected with the main trunk of the vine ... **like in these slides** ...

When Jesus told this story he wanted people to learn something important about how we live and grow as followers of Jesus ... if we're going to grow fruit in our lives we need to hang on to Jesus and to God a bit like the grapes hang on to the grapevine ...

But I'm not sure that Jesus wanted us all to grow grapes.

I think he wanted us to grow some other sorts of fruit in our lives ... things like **love** and **joy** and **patience** and **courage** ... things that Jesus showed us in how **he** lived ... and that we can learn from Jesus if we hang on to him ...

BIBLE READING

Psalm 67 (responsively)

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us –
so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.

May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.

May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will worship him.

John 15:1-17, 26-27

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: love each other.

MESSAGE

We have six fruit trees at our place – three apples, a plum, a lemon and a lime tree. Thanks to Fred and Meron we also have a vigorous boysenberry vine that tends to run rampant if left to its own devices.

Each year during winter, one of our jobs in the garden is to prune and shape the trees and the vines. It's a somewhat stressful job but essential – not just to maintain the size of the trees and the vines – but also to ensure they produce more fruit.



Why is it stressful? Because it feels like you are cutting off so much healthy growth and leaving just the small side branches. But it's these side branches that produce the fruit. The long healthy main branches – if left alone – will turn the trees into a huge five or ten metre high trees that will actually produce less fruit. And the vines

will take over the whole garden.

The other reason for pruning is to remove pests and diseases. The last three years have been wetter and cooler than average during spring and summer so we've had problems with sucking insects and sooty mould. Unless these are treated, all the fruit just withers and dies and falls off.

In the passage we heard from John chapter 15, Jesus calls himself **the true vine**, while God is the gardener and we are the branches.

This is the seventh and final 'I am' saying in John's Gospel.

These sayings all point to a connection between Jesus and God the Father - who is called **I am** or **Yahweh** in Hebrew - throughout the OT.

Each of the sayings draws on imagery and stories from OT ... bread in the wilderness, light at creation, the good shepherd, a vineyard ...

with each saying highlighting an aspect of the life and light that Jesus brings ... that in turn point back to God.

In the OT, the **vine** is a metaphor for **Israel**. In Isaiah chapter 5, God laments that despite being planted in a fertile land, the vineyard of Israel has yielded a poor harvest of wild grapes. In Psalm 80, Israel the vine has been attacked and burned by the nations and desperately needs God's help.

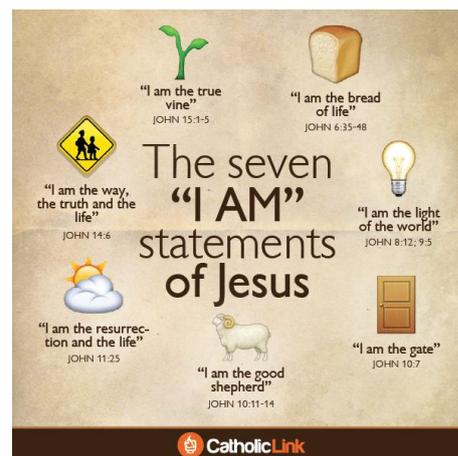
So here in John's Gospel, Jesus presents himself as the **true vine**, the true representative of Israel who produces the sort of fruit God is looking for.

The followers of Jesus are the branches of the vine.



While some vines are grown for their beauty, the purpose of a **grapevine** is to produce **grapes**. But in order to produce its fruit, the branches must remain **connected** to the vine and its roots, which are the source of nutrients and water. Branches that produce no fruit are worthless and are cut off and burned.

The branches that do produce fruit also need to be **pruned**. This always seems a



little mean to the tree or vine or rose bush, but experience shows that it's needed for more and better fruit to develop. So if we follow the illustration Jesus uses, it's essential for us both to remain in the vine and for us to be pruned or cleaned.

So how do we remain in Jesus and produce fruit?

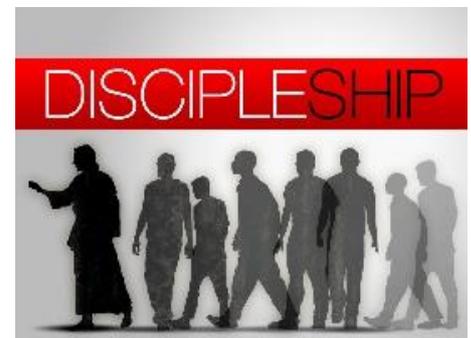
Surprisingly perhaps, the baptism service provides a way of understanding Jesus' teaching. During the baptism liturgy the person being baptised – or their parents – are asked questions about their faith. The congregation is also asked about **their** faith and is called to *maintain a life of worship, witness and service* as we nurture one another in faith.

This call encourages us to nurture the newly baptised person in their faith as they grow to maturity, but also to be a sign to the wider world that we are indeed followers of Jesus.

So returning to Jesus' teaching, the first instruction from Jesus is that his words must remain in us and we in turn must follow Jesus' commandments.

Then we will produce much fruit.

This sounds like the task of **discipleship** ... reminding ourselves of Jesus' teaching, learning to follow, and practicing what we've learned ... A disciple is basically a **learner** and in Christian usage, a disciple is a learner who follows the way of Jesus.



There are various ways we might do this ... through reading and studying Scripture, through prayer, through meditation and contemplation, and through **worship**.



While some of these activities can be done alone, the image of bunches of grapes growing on a vine suggests doing them **together**, as a community. The Bible never imagines solo Christians in the world, but only communities and groups of Christians coming together to learn and to worship. So it's through worshipping together that

we remain connected to the vine, Jesus, and to God.

When we are connected to God through Jesus, we can ask God to help us and to

answer our prayers. Rather than prayer being a blank cheque, however, we are to ask according to God's will and character. Then God will indeed answer our prayers – not so that we look good, but so that God's name is glorified and we become known as disciples or followers of Jesus.

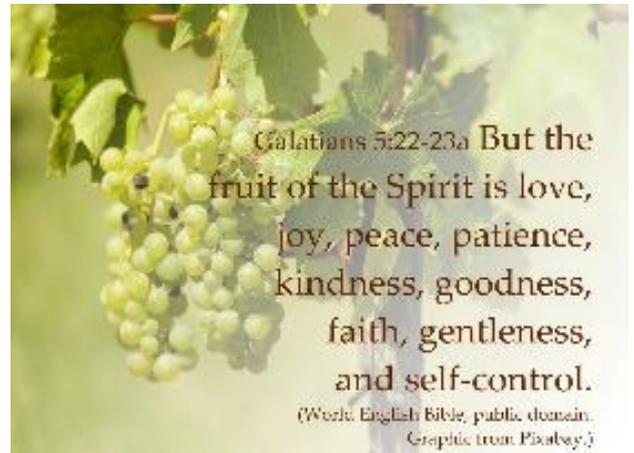
So the first element of remaining in the vine is our **worship life**.

The passage in John 15 talks a lot about **fruit**, fruit that will last.

What does this fruit look like?

In a well-known passage written by the apostle Paul, the fruit of God's Spirit living among us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

How we interact and live with each other in community matters.



THIS IS MY
COMMANDMENT, THAT
YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER
AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.
- JOHN 15:12

Earlier at the Last Supper, Jesus said our love for one another would be the signpost to the wider world that we are indeed followers of Jesus.

Hence the emphasis in today's passage on the command to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

This involves both actions and words.

In the context of this teaching, Jesus has just demonstrated his love for the disciples by washing their feet, an illustration of humble service, doing the task of a servant.

Just to make sure we get the point, after the foot-washing episode Jesus says

'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ... If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them' (John 13:15-17).

So we are to **serve** one another.

The supreme act of love was still ahead – Jesus giving up his life on the cross for the sake of his followers. This selfless gift of love reflected God's deep love for the world. And more personally, it was a demonstration of Jesus' love for his friends, the disciples.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this same thought is captured in Jesus' command that if anyone wishes to follow him, they must be prepared to take up their cross and follow in his footsteps.



This is where discipleship becomes **hard**. We would probably all choose an easy path that avoids pain or suffering, persecution or ridicule. But Jesus is insistent that we must be prepared to follow, even where this is costly. This needs both **courage** and **wisdom** to know when we are being asked to walk this hard road and when it is better to withdraw or retreat from a situation ... such as a broken relationship or a situation of domestic violence.

But the call to **love** and to **service** remains, based on the example of Jesus.

There is a third element to remaining in Jesus. He has **chosen** us, not to sit back in comfort and ease, but rather to **go** and bear fruit.

This is similar to the language of the **Great Commission** at the end of Matthew's Gospel ... **go and make disciples**. The closing verses of this chapter in John suggest that a key part of this going includes **testifying** or **witnessing** to the love and truth of Jesus ...speaking about Jesus and our faith in Jesus, as we are encouraged and enabled by God's Helper, the Holy Spirit.



This activity used to be called **evangelism** – sharing the good news about Jesus. But evangelism has a bad reputation in the Uniting Church today, perhaps due to the sometimes dodgy way it was practiced in past generations.

But it remains true that if we don't share our faith about Jesus in **words**, people will not hear the good news and not respond in faith. So while we need to demonstrate Jesus' love in **action**, we also have to be courageous enough to share Jesus' love in **words**. This is a key part of our **witness**.

So there are three aspects to remaining connected to Jesus the vine – captured in our worship, our witness and our service.

By paying attention to each of these three elements, we will dwell and grow in Jesus

the true vine – even as Jesus lives and grows in the midst of our community. Then we will experience the abundant life and joy – and produce the fruit – that Jesus speaks about.

Our next song offers a window into what this may look like ...

HYMN Let us build a house (verses 1, 3, 4, 5)

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive;
built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space,
as we share in Christ the feast that free us:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place

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