

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B

'I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.'

Many years ago, I was brought up in Australia, my parents had decided to emigrate there when it was fashionable to do so in the 60's. At the time we left this country, I was eighteen months old, and my brother was only a few months old. As my brother and I grew up we were very much aware that we had a family, a large extended family as, from time to time, especially at Christmas and at birthdays, we received large parcels of presents and greetings from everyone still in Britain. Also, I remember hearing stories of my grandparents and uncles and aunts which seemed almost apocryphal in the telling because, to all intents and purposes, my brother and I had never met them.

When I was in university and also at Theological College, I developed a large circle of friends, we were a close-knit group who often met together for coffee and to go out; we shared each other's joys and sorrows and we thought that life would never be the same without each other. Now, many years on, I have lost touch with most of the people from that time. I do not know where they are, what they are doing, and, if occasionally I meet one of my friends from that period, they are often married, have several children, and sadly, I wouldn't have recognised them had I fallen over them in the street.

To what extent then could it be said that my parents, my brother and I were members of our family while we were in Australia? To what extent then could it be said that I was a real friend to those with whom I studied so long ago? Of course, I was born into a family, even though the nuclear family of my parents, my brother and I were literally living on the other side of the world; nevertheless in some real sense we were, by the fact of our birth and that of our parents, part of that family. We were however extremely removed from that family, and while a part of it through birth, yet we were very much 'apart' not being able to be at all involved in the day to day lives of our relatives. It was largely I suppose because of homesickness and a realisation that, although we had made a new 'family' as it were of friends and neighbours in Australia, nevertheless my parents missed our real family and moved back to Britain in the year 1970. I will always be grateful for being brought back to live here, although I miss the warm weather and some aspects of living in Australia, I am always grateful for having met and in a sense being brought up by all members of our extended family. It was a privilege to meet my grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles, and I probably wouldn't be the person today had it not been for their input and contribution to my life. In a sense, I guess we are who we are by those among whom we have mixed and had our being especially during the formative years of our childhood.

During 30 years of ministry I have often had people tell me that they have no need of going to church, that it is possible to be a good Christian without being in the church. What matters, so they say, is what you believe and are a good person. One of the problems that has long occupied scholars and theologians has been the problem of whether Jesus ever meant to establish the Church during his life and ministry on earth. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church has always held the teaching 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus' 'outside the church there is no salvation' and the teaching seems to suggest that for salvation to be complete, then you need to consciously strive to be a regular churchgoer. Perhaps our Gospel passage today would seem to provide a proof text for such a claim.

John's gospel is the most theological of the four gospels. For John, every word had a special meaning, and it is thought that he deliberately chose each word in its place for the emphasis and meaning that each word added to the Gospel message. For John there was light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell, and those who were inside the kingdom of God and those who were outside it. The passage under consideration today cannot be underestimated in its importance theologically.

It is perhaps no accident that, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time that he caught sight of the great ornate vine in gold on the outside of the Temple and referred to himself as the 'True Vine'. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel was portrayed as being the vine or the vineyard of God. Isaiah chapter 5 for example says that 'The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel'. Jeremiah chapter two says 'Yet I planted you a choice vine', and Hosea chapter 10 refers to Israel as a 'luxuriant vine'. The vine then had become the very symbol of Israel. It is also a sad fact that, in the Old Testament, Israel is never referred to as being the Vine without connotations of degeneration being referred to. The message for example of Isaiah's vision is that, although Israel was the choice vine created by God, nevertheless Israel as the vineyard had run wild. The point the prophets make is that salvation cannot be achieved by birth right alone, God's will can only be done by having an intimate relationship with Him and by doing His will. Perhaps it was also no accident that John makes the point that the vine on the outside of the Temple was the sign of the chosen-ness of the Israelites, but that also Jesus the True Vine encapsulated the divine that the Temple represented.

When Jesus drew this picture of the vine he drew on something which was commonplace in the landscape of his time. The vine was grown all over Palestine as it still is. It is a plant which needs a great deal of attention if it is to yield the best fruit; it is grown on terraces and the ground has to be kept perfectly clean. Sometimes the vine is trained to grow along trellises or over houses, and where the plant is healthy it grows luxuriously. Drastic pruning becomes necessary to conserve its life and energy so that it might produce the best fruit. The vine bears two sorts of branches, those that produce fruit, and those which don't. I'm sure you all know from your own gardens that well-kept roses produce many beautiful flowers, but that, should a sucker appear, it produces no flowers and seems to sap all the plant's strength thus inhibiting the growth of the rose bush.

Jesus makes the point that his followers are like branches of the vine. There are those who are bearing images of Christ himself whereas others are found wanting because, despite being part of the vine, bear no fruit and become useless to the vine itself. Now I would suggest that the Church itself is the Vine of Jesus Christ, rooted, grounded and nourished by him. Perhaps those who cut themselves off from the church do so at their own risk. The vine provides nourishment which is essential for the branches, those branches which become separated from the vine become malnourished and die. Perhaps it can be said, that, like my friends from university days, unless effort is made, the friendship in a sense dies or becomes just a vague memory. We must all be aware of the dangers of malnourishment that those with eating disorders often display, I would suggest from experience, that those who do not consciously and regularly seek nourishment from our Lord become spiritually malnourished. And in this day and age, when many people seem to seek their own salvation and adopt a 'pick and mix' attitude to religion, that there is the danger of missing out on perhaps the most important point Jesus makes in his analogy with the vine, that of a corporate religious existence which is quite apart from the merely individual.

So why then is the church necessary to salvation? Firstly, every human being, insofar as they seek some meaning in life and seek some sense of community of shared meaning, ought at least to possess a fundamental openness to religion of some kind. Secondly, I would suggest that the world at large needs communities of faith which testify to values which otherwise might be lost to the detriment of the national and international community. Thirdly, if Christ is the Lord of history and the Saviour of all, then there is a need for a community which testifies to the significance of Jesus Christ and which somehow carries forward the saving work begun in him. And finally, individuals who are convinced of the Lordship of Jesus need a community where this fundamental conviction can be shared in word, in worship, in communal living, and for the establishment and building up of God's kingdom. Therefore, the Church is necessary as an efficacious sign and instrument of God's redemptive work which was begun in Jesus Christ – its aim being to work for the coming of that Kingdom.

So, by being members of the Church we seek in a mystical sense to be a part of Christ. We meet together as the Church to deepen our relationship with God in Christ through prayer, by hearing the Word of God in Holy Scripture, being nourished by Christ through the Sacraments and by consciously seeking to bear fruit in our lives to the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom. If we ignore or neglect our part as a branch in the vine, then we do so at our own peril and neglect God's Kingdom.

Vine of heaven, thy blood supplies
This blest cup of sacrifice;
'Tis thy wounds our healing give;
To thy cross we look and live:
Thou our life! O let us be
Rooted, grafted, built on thee.