

Rev'd Jean's Sermon – Sunday 28th April 2024

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Readings:

Acts 8: 26-40

John 15: 1-8

Five Sundays on and getting closer to the Feast of the Ascension.

Our readings today invite us to look again at our relationships, one with another and across the whole spectrum of the Easter message. In last Sunday's reading we heard how Jesus presents himself to his disciples, and indeed to us in this day – a powerful and gentle message of his description of himself as the “Good Shepherd”, his way of highlighting his relationship with all of God's people, one who is a leader and to be trusted with the job of caring and growth.

Today we have another powerful symbolic image of Jesus, that of living, growing, nourishing. Those of you who relate to our farming community and those of you who are keen gardeners will relate to this description that Jesus uses of himself, that he is “the vine”. Our readings today invite us to hear the message of belonging, nourishment, and appreciation, something that we all need to hear right now. Life revolves around these things of life, many people are searching to find this belonging.

These relational themes are brought to us today in our readings. The very nature of our humanity brought out for us in the Acts of the Apostles today reminds us of that humanity in all of us that sometimes makes us suspicious and that we absolutely need the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We are given the amazing story in the Acts of the Apostles in our first reading. This is the story of how Philip full of the spirit and directed by an angel evangelizes an official of the Ethiopian court, he is directed by the angel to go out on the Southbound road, where he meets, almost, as if by coincidence, a chariot in which is travelling an Ethiopian official, he is reading from the book of Isaiah.

Just to pause for a moment – I don't know where you are in this picture. It is very powerful, the eunuch is cut off from community would have been dismembered in some way, he was a black man, (there was little colour discrimination in those days). He was reading and Philip dared to ask him did he understand the message of Isaiah that he was reading, his reply “can I understand without someone to guide me”. Philip was the guide right there, that resulted in Baptism for the Eunuch, here in this account is a beautiful picture of an overarching divine relationship that draws them together in love. Philip puts the explanation and shows his love that it is through Jesus Christ that God has revealed his universal welcome, this is what servant love looks like.

The word has become understandable to the Eunuch, and a word that has drawn him in love personally, he can feel and experience Jesus Christ for himself. He understands. Philip went on his journey to where he was going, this is a lesson for us all the Christian community to teach, to learn, to guide, and to rejoice together. Result – a new branch now added to the vine by the word shared and explained!

So, to our gospel reading which runs alongside. The Resurrected Lord addresses us, “I am the vine”. And in that promise there is so much that we can relate to, there are promises for us in so much that we can become transformed into something new, empowered and commissioned again as disciples to bear much fruit. Jesus is able to tell us he is the true vine because of his relationship to the Father who is seen in Jesus.

The thought of being pruned to enhance this feels painful, but Jesus makes the new growth thus cutting back, pruning is the opportunity to show that God works always to mould us and shape us into something productive a new reality.

It has been a difficult and testing wet winter for those who work in agriculture, farming community, some things have had to be ploughed back into the earth, the spreading of nutrients too to revive the soil all of which allows the fruits of the earth to flourish again. It is a well-known fact that the harder a grape vine is pruned the more the grapes grow in amazing abundance.

The vine symbolism also indicates for us that it is a living relationship, not merely something from the past. We come here, week by week we receive the wonderful nutrients of bread and wine, to send us to attract others to hear this message we take this sacrament into ourselves it is the very nutrient of life that we can choose to grasp not only that we are constantly allowed the offer of being grafted back to the strength of the main stay branch.

Jesus said This is my Body this is my Blood given for you. This Vine metaphor presents so much reality, reminds us with the disciples that we only live and work, love and pray joined to the vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches". When we abide joined to the vine the potential for the production of fruit is unfathomable. Hope, righteousness, a desire for peace are some of the fruits needed to build our world.

Whether or not we are gardeners, I think we all understand that sometimes things need to be trimmed down, yes, pruned to allow that rebirth to rejoin. What we think might be destructive cutting back, pruning to see actually gives it new life. It is a symbol too of what we now share with those present at the resurrection who like us many times think that what was holding us back is the stone that has been rolled away, allowing that new life to come among us as the vine.

Have there been times in your journey when maybe you have been aware of a new spiritual growth after a time of cutting back / pruned is the word. Sometimes this is very necessary so as to begin again with a new focus, a new confidence that might attract others to help the vine strengthen.

We are in the season of new growth the promise of life and things to come so let us proclaim that our faith our remaining joined to the main stay brings us closer to God, who never has given up on his children, there is always a route back, each human individual will embody this vine in ways particular to his or her unique situation, These are the circumstances in which we share so much for the hope of the world right now, Jesus Christ the Vine apart from which we do not produce the fruit that this relationship is capable of.