

**NAURC Worship at Ipswich Road URC
Harvest 2020**

Reading: John 15 verses 1-9

15 Jesus said to his disciples:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of what I have said to you.

⁴ Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. ⁵ I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me. ⁶ If you don't stay joined to me, you will be thrown away. You will be like dry branches that are gathered up and burned in a fire.

⁷ Stay joined to me and let my teachings become part of you. Then you can pray for whatever you want, and your prayer will be answered. ⁸ When you become fruitful disciples of mine, my Father will be honoured. ⁹ I have loved you, just as my Father has loved me. So remain faithful to my love for you.

Sermon: "I am the vine and you are the branches"

> Our first hymn this morning was one of those great harvest hymns, *Come ye thankful people, come*. In the second verse the words encourage us to think about the grain harvest – which happens in August – so what are we doing in early October? Which got me thinking about another crop that we have here in Norfolk that is harvested round about now – grapes!

> When I looked on the internet I discovered that there are several vineyards near Norwich – and was allowed to visit one with my camera to illustrate today's service – so here comes the advert – thank you to the Chet Valley Vineyard – and also to the Chet Valley churches who provided two of the hymns!

> There is another reason why we are looking at the passage from John 15 about vines. This is because we are celebrating Holy Communion today, just as I did last week at Fairland when we thought about Jesus as the Bread of Life – and today is the other half of our communion elements pair of services - wine.

> I am, however, looking at the vine metaphor that Jesus used rather than wine specifically because Jesus used both bread and vine as two of the "I am" sayings in John's Gospel.

> When looking at any Bible passage its always worth looking though what comes before and after, and that is true for today. We begin our reflections towards the end of the previous chapter where we read Jesus' words:

“..because I live, you will live. Then you will know that I am one with the Father. You will know that you are one with me, and I am one with you.” (14: 19b and 20)

> It's quite difficult to get your head around this concept of mutuality that Jesus is talking about here, so it helps that He explained what He meant by using the metaphor of a vine.

> Let me remind you of part of the chapter 15 reading; (Contemporary English Version)

⁴ Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. ⁵ I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit.

⁸ When you become fruitful disciples of mine, my Father will be honoured.

> It's a powerful metaphor – and would work with lots of other plants and fruit trees too – like apple trees for example, and I know a number of us have those in our gardens.

> The visual imagery works well – but after some thought, I think it works with the biology of how a grapevine works too.

> Without getting too technical – each part of the plant relies on the other.

> The leaves are the place where the energy comes from as photosynthesis uses sunlight to turn carbon dioxide and water into glucose (a type of sugar).

> This then feeds the plant to grow and produce tasty fruit.

> But the leaves rely on the branches to hold them up to the sunlight, and also the sap within them to provide water and nutrients from the earth via the roots – and to distribute the glucose to where it is needed.

> The branches also produce the fruit, which usually contain seeds – the plant's way of reproducing and thus carrying on.

> And all of this depends on the power of sunlight.

> Biology lesson over!

> God is imagined as light in many religions and Jesus said “I am the light of the world” (John 8: 12) – thus in our vine metaphor God's light powers the whole process of life.

> Jesus likens himself to the vine – the essential life-giving connection for us all.

> The branches – that's us – individually, but it's possible to imagine church communities in this way too - reaching outwards – growing.

> And then, when the season is right, we are the ones who produce the fruit that can be shared – the sweet fruit for all. And if we read on in chapter 15 of John, we find that the fruit to share is God's love.

“I chose you and sent you out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last. Then my Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name. So I command you to love each other.” (15:16 and 17)

> And producing love to share, honours God Jesus reminds us. (15: 8)

> That is how this mutuality of the relationship between God and humanity works with Jesus as the key to it all.

> The idea of God’s people being like a vine had been around for a very long time – and still is there in the Jewish faith – for example in Psalm 27 that I used for our call to worship, but also in Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5 among many others.

> The Isaiah example is part of God’s judgment of Israel going off the rails as we read in verse 7:

“I am the Lord All-Powerful!

Israel is the vineyard, and Judah is the garden I tended with care.
I had hoped for honesty and for justice,
but dishonesty and cries for mercy were all I found.”

> It’s a reminder of the encouragement of the vine metaphor, but also a reminder of the responsibility we have in doing all we can to remain fruitful for God. And Jesus told a few parables on those lines too (see Luke 20).

> That was all long ago, so what can it mean for us today?

> At harvest time the traditional focus of worship is, quite rightly, to give thanks to God for the provision of our food, and all those who work so hard to produce it.

> Our attention is also drawn to the importance of caring for the environment too.

> But today, I’d like to suggest that there is another very important harvest to think about.

> No, I’m not suggesting that we all start drinking large quantities of wine. Although I suspect the vineyard owners would be very pleased indeed!

> Let’s return to the vine metaphor that Jesus used as recorded in John 15 when He said “I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit.”

> We are responsible for the harvest of Jesus – God’s love freely given for others is that harvest. It’s enhancing people lives that is the benefit of this fruit.

> I don’t know if any of you watch *Songs of Praise*?

> In their harvest festival episode a couple of weeks ago, one of the items was about a project at an urban Anglican Church in Trafford. They have started a community garden project in their grounds. Not only is it producing all sorts of crops for the community, it is also bringing people together from a variety of faiths and none.

> It was the project co-ordinator, Cath Wade, who isn’t religious, who said something memorable that really got me thinking about this sermon.

> She said: "Our harvest is the people we get to know".

> Remember John 15: 8?

"When you become fruitful disciples of mine, my Father will be honoured."

> As we share Communion, we share the love of Jesus who gave His life so we might live. This harvest time and onward lets also try to bear as much fruit of the love of God as we can so others may share in life in all its fullness too.

Amen