
[Jesus said] ¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser. ²Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

Have you ever been alone in a crowded room? Many will know what is meant by this. Either something rather traumatic has occurred (eg: the funeral of a loved one, some conflict or the like), or events are such, or the people around you are such, or you actually know the true nature of your soul and recognise it for what it is (perhaps from past traumatic experiences), and you feel alone, even when people surround your life....

In 1966 the Beatles released a famous song that in many ways was radical for 'popular music': 'Eleanor Rigby. It features the lines: "Ah look at all the lonely people; Ah look at all the lonely people... All the lonely people, where do they all come from?"

Though "Eleanor Rigby" was far from the first pop song to deal with death and loneliness, it came as quite a shock to many pop listeners. It took a bleak message of depression and desolation, written by a famous pop band, with a sombre, almost funeral-like backing, to the number one spot of the pop charts. The bleak lyrics were not the Beatles' first deviation from love songs, but were some of the most explicit.

"All the lonely people, where do they all come from?"

In a Article in the Sydney Morning Herald some time ago, a writer reflected this theme of 'loneliness'. The writer noted that it's possible to walk down the street without making eye contact with anyone. Self-service at the supermarket means we can do our grocery shopping without speaking. It's even possible to spend the majority of our days (and lives) working alongside people without ever having any kind of meaningful conversation or connection.

This all seems counterintuitive. After all, humans crave connection. One author has said, "Connection is why we're here - it gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about. It doesn't matter whether you talk to people in

social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection - the ability to feel connected - neurobiologically that's how we're wired, it's why we're here."

In response to this many people seek to 'connect' via the internet where people can share in a way they've never done before. However, in 'real terms', the number of confidants we have is decreasing. A recent study found that 48 per cent of respondents only had one confidant compared to a similar study 25 years ago when people claimed to have around three people they could confide in.

Why are people more 'isolated'? Part of this is 'the world'. But part of this also is because we want to be separated from people. It is our nature to often 'build walls' because we do not want people to 'see' what's really going on in our hearts. Reflecting on technology and communication an author has said, "Human relationships are rich and messy and demanding and we clean them up with technology." And, of course, as Christians we are called to reflect on the true nature of 'sin' that divides and separates...

In our Gospel for today Jesus speaks of being a 'vine' and His disciples as 'branches'. Jesus said this on the night He was betrayed, and earlier that evening Jesus had said (John 14:23), "Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love them, and ***we will come to them and make our home with them.***"

Jesus later says, "I AM the Vine" Jesus begins - 15:1 "I AM..." (*ego eime*). John used the phrase "I AM" to refer to the presence of the divine in Jesus. The phrase is an allusion to the name of God, "YHWH" (in Exodus 3:14 as "I AM WHO AM").

In the Old Testament, the Vine is often used as the type of Israel, planted and tended by the Almighty as the husbandman (See Isa. 5:1; Ps.80:8-16; Jer. 2:21, etc). Israel, however, had proved a wild and fruitless Vine. Instead of it, therefore, Christ had now been planted by the Father as the True Vine.

The Lord Jesus is the true vine. This word denotes that which is true or genuine.

Something amazing in this passage is that the actions of the "gardener" are similar in both cases! The unfruitful branches are "cut off" (*airo*) and the fruitful branches are "pruned" or "cut clean" (*kathairo*).

airo means "to lift up and carry (away)." It is used of the Lamb of God **taking away** the sins of the world (John 1:29). Something that is "taken away" may be "destroyed," the meaning of the word in John 11:48. Here the sinful branches are 'cut-off'.

But tied up with this is the pruning done by God (*kathairo*). This is related to the word of **cleansing** or **purifying** the disciples. Someone once said that the secret of pruning is to trick the plant into thinking that it is dying so it will produce great amounts of fruit. (NOTE that both of these verbs are in the present tense --

they are ongoing activities). The relationship of abiding means that we cannot "go it alone" in our spiritual lives: Jesus says "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless you abide in Me" (John 15:4).

"I am the true vine" is one of the seven I AM sayings of Jesus. You may recall some of Jesus' I AM teachings such as I am the good shepherd; I am the door; I am the bread of life; Each I AM teaching teaches us something different about Jesus Christ. "I am the vine" teaches that Jesus Christ is the energy that produces fruit in our lives. Remaining in, abiding in, the vine is crucial. And, in John 6:56 we hear our Lord say, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood **abide** in me, and **I in them.**"

In a book "The Hand That Holds Me" a pastor writes, "The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the most sublime moment of the Christian life, the most awe filled moment, but also at the same time the most human. There, at the Lord's table, God comes to us----the over-whelming, majestic, creator of all the galaxies--right where we are most human and worried about so many mundane and human things ... God chooses to come to us in our sinfulness to forgive, cleanse, to prune, and to make us able to bear more fruit for Him."

Connection to the vine is essential. Another writer has said that we are a "cut-flower civilization", we look good for a while but without roots, we soon wither and die. To abide in Jesus is to have roots. To abide in Jesus is to allow the life to flow from the roots to our lives. In John 7:38 we hear our Lord say, "Whoever **believes in Me**, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within." To abide in Jesus is to tend the connection. We do this as we read God's Word, spend time in prayer, and gather in worship around the Lord's Table to be fed and strengthened by the Lord for mutual edification and encouragement (cf. reading aloud; a prayer breakfast on a Sunday...).

The image of community that emerges from John 15:1-17 is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling.

The communal life envisioned in the image of 'the vine' raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western society's ideas about 'individualism'. At the heart of Jesus' message is a *connection to one another*. Jesus words about 'vine and branches' is a call to the community of faith to bear the fruit of love (and this is clearly seen in the following verses: John 15:9ff). Several teachings from the letters of the Apostle Paul also inform us about the vine, branches and producing much fruit.

Gal. 5:22 – "The **fruit** of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

Eph 5:9 – "The **fruit** of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."

Col 1:6 – "Just as it (the gospel) is bearing **fruit** and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing **fruit** among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God."

We may talk about the amazing contemporary technologies that are supposed to make us more connected than ever. However, in spite of all our “connections” we seem to find ourselves with more sense of “disconnection” than perhaps ever before (and sometimes we would want to rather embrace this). In John 15:8 Jesus says, “If you abide in *Me*, and *My words abide in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.”

Here Jesus is speaking about is a deep connection with *His life*. And, as we are so ‘connected’ to Jesus, so we realise the great eternal ‘connection’ we have with others through Christ our Lord.

Staying connected to Christ has a high price. Sometimes it costs us the respect of the world. But the price of life without Christ is much higher. Imagine what life would be like without faith, without Christ, and without the goodness of Christian charity to help others along the way. Imagine a life without Christ! Even at times if we do have to walk by ourselves, even if we have to be loners in the name of Jesus, we will never be truly alone. Remember whose team we're really on, whose name we can invoke in need. Jesus is the Vine; He is always ‘there’. Amen.