



Rev Helen Jacobi

Vines

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Year B Easter 5

2 May 2021

My father had a grape vine in his garden on our back fence in Lower Hutt. Lower Hutt is not a place known for grape growing but every year we would have a lovely crop of purple grapes. We were not allowed to taste even one grape until they had been duly cut and weighed with the weights recorded in a little notebook. And then the best grapes were taken to neighbours and friends – Dad seemed to have a list of elderly ladies who were the lucky recipients of grapes and veges. And then finally we were allowed to tuck into the sweet grapes that were left over. I don't remember the pruning process but I am sure it was done carefully every year as Dad was very proud of his grape vine.

The image of the vine and the vinegrower was a well known one from the Hebrew scriptures. In Isaiah (5) and other places God is the vinegrower and the people are the vine – sometimes growing wild and sometimes bearing good fruit.

In this passage from the gospel of John Jesus becomes the vine and the people the branches. We are to stay connected to the vine and our job is to bear fruit. Just like real vines there will need to be some pruning or cleansing.

The word for prune and clean or cleanse is the same word (*cathirao*) and it is also used to describe Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper.

In John's chronology this teaching of Jesus about the vine comes after he has washed the disciples' feet and after the sharing of bread and wine at the Last Supper.

This teaching is for the inner circle of disciples urging them to stay connected to each other and to Jesus, despite what is about to happen.

Jesus has washed their feet to teach them about service; he has shared bread and wine to show them how to remember him; now he uses the image of the vine to show them how to stay in community, to stay connected.

Abide in me as I abide in you, he says; or stay with me.

Thomas Boomershine says "The word (*meno*) is about staying. It's about remaining with him and in him, not leaving, not getting distracted, but staying there."¹

Of course by the next day the disciples are scattered and hidden, but a few days later they will begin to gather and to take the first tentative steps of forming community and learning what it is to abide together.

They will begin to figure out what they need to build community – what spiritual practices from their Jewish heritage they will keep – reading the scriptures, praying the psalms, looking out for the orphan and the widow; and what practices they will let go of, or prune – the food rules, and circumcision.

This won't happen overnight; issues and rules will be debated for a century at least.

70 years or more will pass before John's gospel is written down and so this passage describes what has been happening for their community over those years.

¹ http://gotell.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Jn15_01-08_commentary.pdf

They have, by trial and error, established a way of being together. Of being followers of the risen one. Of gathering, worshipping, caring for each other, and working out who they are. Some people will have left, others will have joined. New generations have been born. So by the time 2nd and 3rd generation Christians are growing up, the image of the vine will be key to their understanding of their connection to Jesus and to their community.

They are encouraged to “bear fruit”.

What kind of fruit will their lives grow?

The letters of John which emerge from the same community wrestle more with this question.

What kind of life are we to lead then?

“beloved, let us love one anotherif we love one another, God lives in usthose who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

And love is not just a theory – from last week’s part of the letter of John we read “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 Jn 3:17).

I tweeted that verse last week in relation to some governments not sending vaccines to India.

and this week “those who say ‘I love God’, and hate their brother or sister, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

We are called to love and care for those in front of us if we want to be able to claim to love God.

We bear fruit when we are connected to the vine of love.

This life of community is not there by magic, we have to work at it. We have opportunities coming up to work on our vine – we have a retreat day on Saturday; we have a group for newer parishioners starting next week; we have our Telling Our Stories series in June. All these things are designed to strengthen our personal spiritual practices as well as our life in community.

And looking beyond the parish there is a Sustainability workshop for the diocese coming up; last night I attended an Iftar dinner at the Avondale mosque, reconnecting with leaders in the Moslem community.

Our work to support the City Mission and the Religious Diversity Centre continues.

As we develop our digital platform of material for our digital community we will be exploring how can we be a community – a vine – across the digital waves. We know we could in lockdown and how do we carry on the connections we made then (livestream viewers might have some thoughts).

And of course every day in our individual and family lives we have opportunities to grow in love and prune out the other stuff.

Vines, branches, pruning, abiding, bearing fruit, showing love.

Let those images stay with you this week – they return in next week's gospel as we continue our Easter journey in the life of the Risen One.