

Sunday 28 April – Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Christine Newmarch

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

If you have a garden, or even a few plants in tubs or window boxes, I wonder if you are up to date with pruning? It's time to deadhead daffodils, and sadly most of my tulips are past their best. Even indoor miniature roses need attention.

I have my little guide book, but deciding what to prune, how and when, can seem a daunting. At least, it does to me!

And then there's the grapevine. I wonder if anyone here grows grapes? They do need to be pruned carefully, don't they?

Jesus had most probably seen plenty of grapevines as he walked through the Judean countryside from one village to another. The chances are some had been better pruned than others and he had seen the consequences. The fruitful years after careful pruning, and the disappointing years when pruning was not so well done.

The image of the vine is often used in the Bible to represent Israel. It often describes a bad vine, bearing no fruit.

Psalm 80 describes a vine being brought out of Egypt; Hosea refers to Israel as 'a spreading vine'; Isaiah contains a 'Song of the Vineyard' in which God cares for the vine but only receives bad grapes in return. Ezekeil describes Jerusalem as a 'useless vine.'

By contrast, Jesus tells us that he is the true vine.

It is no accident that Jesus says 'I am the true vine' just as he had said earlier in this his last discourse on the night before his arrest.

In the Old Testament, God had told Moses 'My name is "I am". Tell the people that "I am" sent you.'

So whenever Jesus said, 'I am' – and there are 7 'I am' sayings recorded in John - he was claiming to be one with God the Father.

Jesus, the good vine would bear good fruit.

What does Jesus mean in this figurative language by good fruit? St Paul answers that when he describes the fruit of the spirit as the qualities of good character: love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Jesus, the good vine bears good fruit, but it depends on us being branches of his vine, and on pruning.

Branches that bear no fruit waste the energy of the vine, and are no use. You notice that Jesus is not talking about deadwood, but any branch not bearing fruit.

The thing about pruning is that to be effective, it means cutting into a living part of the plant. So, for Jesus, the true vine, any pruning would be painful.

If we are not fruitful, it pains his loving heart, but he promises that all those who abide in him, will be fruitful. Abiding is a word we tend not to use in everyday conversation. It is about more than just living, more of an indwelling, being caught up in Jesus' very being, with a sense of belonging and conforming.

But notice also that fruitful branches are pruned too, to make them bear more fruit. Perhaps that pruning is the discomfort, the pain, the sacrifice that being a Christian can bring. What might that be? Well, anything from spending time in prayer and worship when others are shopping or gardening, foregoing potential pleasures to absolute rejection and persecution. We are inextricably linked to Jesus, the true vine, as we abide in him, and by allowing ourselves to be pruned back, we become ever more Christ-like.

So what does all this mean for us today? Should we go home and prune our grapevines right away? Yes, we probably should, if we have not done it already, and it is on my to-do list! But what else?

Are we to look out for someone reading the Bible out loud with the car window down in a traffic jam, and leap in alongside them? Well, probably not.

But we can see from the account of Philip and the Ethiopian court official that God wishes us to welcome people who are different from us, and help them to understand the scriptures. The Ethiopian official, would most likely have been a black man, a convert to Judaism who, as a eunuch, would have been considered unclean and been excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, and was travelling on the wilderness road, well away from other people. Yet he was a man longing to understand more about God.

Philip in the power of the Holy Spirit was able to interpret part of the Suffering Servant narrative from Isaiah in the context of Jesus' suffering, his death and resurrection. Through the impromptu roadside baptism, the Ethiopian was grafted into the true vine, just as Philip had been, and as we have been through our baptism.

Our calling, our pattern of growth within the true vine will differ from Philip's, and indeed most likely from each other's, but let us through prayer and reflection let the Spirit guide us, so that those we encounter can experience the healing, joy and love which only Jesus can bring to this broken world. Amen.