

Sermon for Sunday 28 April 2024 – The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Pete Postle, Reader

Acts 8.26-40; Psalm 22.25-31; 1 John 4.7-21; John 15.1-8

May all I say and think be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.
Would you like to sit, please?

Of all that Jesus said, I find today's gospel reading the most poetic, the most staggeringly beautiful, and for all of us, the most thought-provoking. Just to backtrack a little, in John's gospel, chapter 13, has been recorded the Last Supper. Judas has left the group. Jesus has explained to those who remain what he must suffer in the next few days. Now he says to his disciples at the end of chapter 14, 'Rise, let us be on our way'. So indulge me if I make an attempt to put this event into perspective. We can imagine the little group of disciples following Jesus in hushed silence. They've asked their questions, had their answers, but now the time has come to listen every word he has to say as they walk through Jerusalem. Perhaps as Jesus starts this discourse, they're passing the porch of the temple, and Jesus could have pointed up to it and reminded them of the great heritage of their nation. For, to the remnants of Israel, their nation, their people, were the vine.

Psalm 80 verse 8: 'You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land.' But as their history develops, the quality of that vine becomes suspect. From a host of Old Testament references, here's one from Hosea; 'Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built. As his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false. Now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars and destroy their pillars.' Or Isaiah 5; 'The Lord says, and now inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do to my vineyard that I have not done in it. When I expected to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?' The Hebrew tribes of Israel have come a long way in land and possessions since God's commissioning of their patriarchal ancestor, Abraham.

But their development as a people of God has progressed little further than the law has given to Moses more than 1,200 years before Christ. They have shown that as a people alone, that is, apart from God's intervention, they are not capable of that perfect response to his commission. And so eventually, the prophets of Israel start to foresee a new line. Back to Isaiah 53; 'And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground.' So it's time that Jesus, this vehicle of God's message to all people, moved on. Jesus says, 'I am the true vine'. Those lines makes it clear that he is the whole vine, not just the stem from which we as branches spring. 'I am the vine, you are the branches, those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.' His father is the vine-grower, and he tends his vine with perfect care. If a branch in me, in Jesus, bears no fruit, the Father cuts it out. If a branch is bearing fruit, the Father prunes it so it might fruit all the better. There's an unavoidably stern message for us there. Once you recognise yourself as a branch of that divine vine, then it is expected of you that you will bear fruit.

And of course, the converse applies. You're not much good if you become a member of God's vine, a part of Jesus, and don't do anything to demonstrate and justify the worth of that great privilege. Such branches wither and dry up. They're thrown into the fire. The mediaeval church interpreted such sayings literally and devised a frightening vision of hell. But we must remember that our God is always merciful and of great kindness. So I prefer to think Jesus is still talking in metaphors here. But if you do take Jesus's message on board, if you think and act in accordance with his and his Father's wishes, 'if you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you'. Right. Is that the case for prayers being answered? Is that sewn up then, prayers being answered? There are those who claim from this passage that prayers are always answered. There are those who are disappointed and those whose faith is tested because they see no answer to their most fervent prayers. Yet the solution to this problem is clear to see if you re-examine the context provided here. 'If you abide in me and my words abide in you, then ask for whatever you wish'. If your thoughts are turned towards God, towards Jesus, then one of the first one of the first things you will recognise is your own selfishness and humankind's selfishness more generally.

You can't get away from it. One of the frustrations of trying to be a good human, let alone a as a good Christian, is that you can never entirely defeat that selfishness. Jesus recognises and addresses that fact. Love others as yourself, he commands. If someone wants your coat, offer him your jacket as well. Turn the other cheek. Walk the extra mile. So if Jesus acknowledges this difficulty, so should we. Jesus's promise in today's lesson is based upon the assumption we're trying to behave as God would have us behave. If that is so, then we should know better than to ask for something in our prayers that is for our own selfish ends. Easier said than done, though. Is it not natural to ask for the return to health of someone we care for? Or to plead in prayer for the avoidance of violence in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, or elsewhere? In each case, do we know what's best for the individual or the nation? What are the criteria by which we have judged? How can we be sure that our motives are the purest? Well, the answer to those three questions is the same as for any other similar moral decision. Heaven knows. God knows best. Always.

I'm going to finish you rather oddly with a prayer because tomorrow, 29th of April, is the feast day for Catherine of Siena, who died in 1380. It's quite a whimsical prayer, I think.

Dear Lord, it seems that you so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us. So you created us. Then when we turned away from you, you redeemed us. Yet you are God, and so have need of us. Your greatness is made no greater by our creation. Your power is made no stronger by our redemption. You have no duty to care for us, no debt to repay us. So it is love, and love alone, which moves you. Amen.