

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – 2021

My sermon text is taken from NRSV John 15; 1-8.

The Easter season takes us through a contemplative period where we consider Jesus' many roles and his ultimate sacrifice for us. The text is taken from the second part of Jesus' farewell discourse. The discourse's setting is thought to be *en route* to a garden from the Last Supper. If so, it may have occurred in the temple courtyard where a great golden grape vine hung over the temple entrance and could possibly be seen glinting in the light of the moon. Or it may have occurred in a garden along the terraces of the Mount of Olives. For those of us who have been with someone about to depart –travel, migration, or death – we cherish the last words and conversation we have with the person leaving. Time is of the essence at partings so Jesus was not going to waste words and what he had to say was critical. So too we should hold dear these words from Jesus's parting.

^{Verse1} I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower

In the Old Testament Israel was regarded as the Vine¹ (Psalms, Isaiah Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea). Israel was the vineyard planted by the Lord from which he expected good grapes but which usually produced bad grapes. Some notes about the growing of grapes will be instructive for the rest of the sermon. Grape growing requires two things:

1. training of the vines
2. pruning of the branches

I had first-hand knowledge of this biblical plant and another, the fig, as my mother had a grapevine which she cared for year after year and at one point she had three fig trees. I watched her train and prune her beloved grape vine year after year and exult in years of bountiful harvest when she could extract juice and make preserves. In my sermon I will also use another trailing plant, the Cow Pea, but bear with me as things unfold.

¹ (Psalm 80:8-19, Isaiah 5:1-10, Jeremiah 2:21, 6:8-9, Ezekiel 17: 6-8, 19:10-14 and Hosea 10:1-2)

In ancient days vines were trained either by being allowed to trail along the ground and the fruit bearing branches lifted up by placing rocks or poles under them to allow aeration to produce better grapes or they were trained from the outset on poles or trellises which lifted the branches enhance their fruit bearing potential. Pruning was also essential and was done first in spring when the vines were flowering. This pruning had four parts:

1. Removal of growing tips of vigorous shoots to slow growth
2. Cutting off one or two feet from the end of growing shoots to prevent entire shoots from being snapped off by the wind
3. The removal of some flower or grape clusters so those that were left could produce more and better quality fruit
4. Removal of suckers that arose from below the ground or from the trunk and main branches so that the strength of the vine was not sucked away

The second pruning was in autumn after the grapes were harvested and the vines were dormant. This involved the removal of dead branches, those that had produced fruit in the previous season but would not produce fruit in the ensuing season. It also involved cutting back the desired branches (the shoots from the year old branches that would produce fruit in the coming year) to ensure maximum fruit production. After the autumn pruning the cuttings, including many wooden branches, were gathered up and burned.

In verse 1 Jesus uses the word True (alēthinos) to speak to that which is true or genuine. He used it on this occasion to show that he had produced what Israel had failed to produce, fruit that the wine grower was looking for. By referring to the Father as the vine-grower Jesus was showing that God was in control of his ministry (as the vine) and that of his disciples (as the branches).

A small book *Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance* by Bruce Wilkinson greatly influenced my contemplation for this sermon. Wilkinson defines Abundance as 'the beautiful overflow of true worth in a person's life.' It is this overflow that arises from our spirituality and connection to the vine that will carry us into the mission aspect of today's theme, but back to the vine and bearing fruit. What lessons do ancient vines and timeless

agricultural practices have for us gathered here today at the UWI Chapel? We are a mix of personalities like the disciples gathered – cautious Thomas, reckless Peter, guileless Nathaniel and scheming James. We sometimes get it and sometimes don't. There are times when our faith wavers or we deny Christ. We can see ourselves in the motley crew that was Jesus' disciples. We are the branches. We are the focus of attention because it is we who produce the fruit of mission and good works. Fruit of mission doesn't necessarily mean evangelism, mission weeks, tents or wayside pulpits. Fruits are the sweetest prize you get from your plants, the results of your labour and stewardship. Psalm 1: 3

*They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

The Christian bears inner and outer fruit

- Inner fruit – borne out of allowing God to nurture in you a new Christ like quality
- Outer fruit – good works: a thought, attitude or action of ours that God values. The sharing of our faith. The fruit of our lives is in every sphere that we operate in.

^{Verse 2} He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes* to make it bear more fruit.

The same root word *kathairó* in Greek refers to both pruning and cleansing. The Greek word *airo* translated as take away would be better taken as 'take up' or 'lift up' – remember raising of vines for aeration? In vineyards the vine-growers walk through and look for the vines that are trailing and can become dusty or mildewed. They don't want to lose the branch so the leaves are washed and lifted and tied or wrapped around the trellis. I am sure this imagery is not lost on you and echoes so many other passages in the bible of looking for the lost, reclaiming remnants and gathering them up. Wilkinson uses four baskets as metaphors for the yield of fruit.

- Basket 1 – no fruit
- Basket 2 – fruit
- Basket 3 – more fruit
- Basket 4 – much fruit

The Father wants more fruit from us so much that He actively tends our lives so we will keep moving up – from barren branches to productive branches, from empty to overflowing baskets. More is always possible. Wilkinson asks and I ask, how much fruit do you see in your life today?

Focus on the words every branch in me – you can be a believer but bear no fruit – the so called bench warmers uh hmm, you know you turn up but ‘yuh ting nuh tun up’ or ‘tune een’ to Christ and the mission. If you are in Basket 1 – then today can mark a starting point.

Discipline is a key component of love. Hebrews 12:5-6 tell us

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.*

God often steps in to administer discipline, to point you away from sin, take away destructive behaviours such as addictions. In our spiritual journey we must accept that God is the source of discipline, He disciplines all and He always acts out of love. God the vine-grower corrects our errant growth by training us, lifting us up so we can bear fruit. God prepares us by thinning, reducing and cutting off. We may need to sever destructive friendships or places of association, we may need less (less pursuit of wealth and its symbols) or we may to give up lesser priorities. The secret here is simple, less is more. So we need that heavy pruning to cut back the leaves of our lives, to direct resources to fruit and to let light in to where fruit is borne. Pruning – cutting away – and Discipline are not quite the same. We must take time to discern which one is at work in our lives by searching ourselves in a series of questions:

- Do you sense something is at work in your life? Is there discomfort?
- What is your level of fruit? None or Some?
- What is the vine-makers desire? Fruit, More Fruit or Much Fruit?
- What needs to go? Sin or Self?
- How do you feel? Sad or Guilty? versus Relieved or Trusting?
- What is your response? Repentance or Release?
- When does it end? When we stop sinning or When God is finished.

You may look at your life and see branches being cut away, feeling besieged even asking, Why me Lord? What next? What more? God will not stop tending your life. Pruning does not limit your life; it opens it up for increased yield.

Verse 3 You have already been cleansed*by the word that I have spoken to you

In verse 3 Greek Kathairō and Katharos 'to clean' and 'clean' are played on. The disciples had been made clean through the words of Jesus but now the Father was also cleansing/pruning them so they could and would bear more fruit. Jesus would be taken away and they would continue to grow in his absence. They would also face future pruning and discipline to grow even more than they could see at that time. It is as we hear and respond to the teaching of Jesus that we become more fruitful.

Verses 4-5 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Abide here on the part of the disciple and us refers to continuing in fellowship, remaining faithful and remaining obedient to Jesus. On the part of Jesus *abiding in you* refers to Holy Spirit the person he came in the form of after death. The Spirit that produces 'fruit' that pleases the Father. The fruit we hear of in Galatians 5 22-23

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

The warning is issued that if we separate from Jesus we can do nothing. This admonition needs to be kept close in mind for mission.

Verse 6 **Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.**

This verse speaks to the autumn pruning and most likely is foreshadowing Judas Iscariot. The passive voice suggests that is God who exacts the judgement.

Verse 7 **If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**

It will be done for you is the passive voice indicating that it will be God who responds. In John 14:13-14 Jesus gives a similar promise with respect to prayer – he will give whatever is asked in his name.

Verse 8 **My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become* my disciples**

Bear much fruit – fruit is the outcome of our entire life and ministry as we remain in fellowship with Christ by keeping his commands and experiencing him through the indwelling of the Spirit. In our lives and our ministry then we are to reflect on the character of God and how he is glorified by us from day to day. As we bear fruit we are showing ourselves to be disciples. This bring me to some of the deliberations that the Working Group on Intentional Discipleship had as we prepared to launch that movement in our local diocese – what is discipleship? After much tossing out and about we came quickly to the realisation that discipleship was not about the sending out in twos, or open air affairs. Discipleship was a daily pursuit. *'Discipleship is about the shape and purpose of our whole lives... A calling to a lived out faith.*

We do not need large stages or spaces to live out our faith. So now to my Cow Peas story that features my daughter Bethany. Bethany used to enjoy helping my mother to gather Cow Peas at her home. One day my mother gave Bethany a handful of pods and told her to try her hand with them. Bethany dutifully sowed the seeds in two small 12 inch square areas of soil against the front wall of our house. She carefully watched the seeds

germinate, got Cass the gardener to stake and tie them, watched each flower bloom and each tiny pod emerge as fruit set. She defended the plants against the caterpillars she named Mr Fuzzy and watered them. There were excited cries of Mommy, Mommy come catch the excitement for each flower and each pod. She then carefully watched until the pods were ready to be picked and stored them in a designated basket. Well along came the day when Auntie Tiny (her caregiver) declared that we had a significant mass of pods that she and Bethany could shell and cook. So the pot was put on and the peas made into rice and peas. I was then able to take Bethany to her grandmother's house with a container of rice and peas that she could proudly report was cooked from the peas given to her that she had planted and faithfully waited upon. Remember the area of soil – two square feet. But the vines reached upward and were lush. I do not have to describe Mama's delight with the returns on her challenge.

The church is fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending. Its reason for being is to serve God's purposes for all the world as God's witnessing people. All missions include the idea of leaving the comfort of our normal fellowship of believers to engage with those who do not know Christ as we do. We must not only follow Jesus, we must be identified culturally as persons who follow Him. *'Discipleship is about the shape and purpose of our whole lives... A calling to a lived out faith'.*

Collectively the community of faith should seek to discern the Spirit of God's call to, and will, for His Mission. In baptism each person receives both the Spirit of God and the commission to God's mission. The Spirit's presence and gifts enthuse, enable and empower. God's mission is characterized by relationship - *Abide in me as I abide in you*, since God is community - Father, Son and Spirit; or alternatively: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Any 'missional commitment' arises from the Spirit's calling to God's mission.

So back to the vine and the vineyard – all vineyards have a mix of new and old vines or rootstock. Viticulturists often look for new varieties to add to their vineyards to improve their product. We too should be open to new ideas, new ways and new challenges or new persons to improve the

harvest. Certainly the COVID19 pandemic has shown us how many new ways we can do things and how with technology our reach can be extended into new spaces. The call to Intentional Discipleship is a challenge to us all where we are at right now in our spiritual lives.

Matthew 9: 37-38 ³⁷*The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few;*
³⁸*therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."*

The Intentional Discipleship challenge to bear fruit, more fruit or much fruit rests upon each one of us. Will you be a Jonah and run away? Will you be a Moses and complain about a perceived impediment? Will you be a Saul and compromise on what is asked of you? Will you be a Jeremiah and have excuses stacked up by the half dozen? Or will you be a Paul and experience the joy that comes to those in the mission-field who keep their eyes on the prize? What will be your response?

Words from Hymn 416, I the Lord of Sea and Sky

*I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard My people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin,
My hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear My light to them?
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart*

I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me

Amen.