**17th May 2015**

**John 15. 1-18**

I don’t know what season of the year you enjoy the most but spring is often most people’s favourite. The contrast between the dark bare winter and the new life and colour of spring makes this season a joy and a refreshing change.

The Met office said this week that April has been one of the sunniest on record. The UK as a whole has seen nearly 200 hours of sunshine during April, 35% more than a typical April.

Southern and eastern parts of the UK had the most sunshine.

So if you have been in a bad mood during April you can’t blame it on the weather.

I know many of you enjoy your gardens and of course with spring the garden is full of colour again and it is a delight to behold.

In our biblical text for today Jesus goes horticultural. He says I am the vine you are the branches - abide in him and you will bear much fruit.

Jesus used stories that people could relate to everyday things that they understood, but the stories had lots of meaning and messages entwined in the analogies Jesus used.

When Jesus spoke about vineyards the people of Israel would have known what he was talking about. Growing grapes was an important industry that had been cultivated over years. Isaiah pictured Israel, the people of God, as the vineyard of God when he said “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel”. Israel was the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham.

In this story Jesus likened himself to the vine, while the fruit bearing branches represented his followers the disciples. God is depicted as the Gardener who tends and cares for the vine.

Four things I want to briefly comment on. Pruning, bearing fruit, love each other, being called a friend.

As all gardeners know the branches of the vine need to be **pruned a**nd the dead wood removed for new growth to take place.

If you have been using our Bible reading notes in these last few weeks they have been covering these chapters in john’s gospel which are the feature of our sermons this month.

A former warden of St Cuthbert’s on holy island, Ian Fosten wrote about how one April he was walking the pilgrimage route to Santiago Compostela in northern Spain. The weather wasn’t very sunny and as he trod through the Rioja wine region, cold wet and footsore, he passed through vineyards showing little sign of promise – just rows upon rows of gnarled stumps beneath waist high wires.

He recalled that within the plant world, grape vines present a paradox. He learned this from a gardening expert on a radio show. To a woman’s question, ‘how can I get sweet and tasty grapes on my vine?’ he replied that once the bunches begun to form, she should reduce their number by as much as she dared, then she should cut back some more. She should go and have a cup of tea and then prune some more until she wept at the apparent loss. ‘Then’ he concluded, ‘you will have yourself some sweet and tasty grapes!’

Ian Fosten concludes that in choosing the vine as his analogy Jesus teaches us that it is out of the tough calls, the knock backs, the weariness and the hard pruning of life’s events that he sweetest wine of the kingdom is produced.

Can we therefore not try to be too precious or overly protective of ourselves or others but to trust our lives to the pruning wisdom of God?

When we are in community in the church – it can get painful at times. We can feel the sharp cuts of other’s secateurs. How we respond is part of our growth – how sweet and tasty we can become – or how bitter and sour we may turn out.

The point is to **bear fruit**. Jesus says if you remain in me and I in you you will bear much fruit that will last.

Jesus reminds us that to be able to love we need to stay connected to God through him. If we go it alone we don’t have the support and encouragement of the vine. In fact we usually wither and die. We need Christ as our root and foundation and the rest of the vine our Christian community to support and encourage our new growth.

How do you become connected to the “true vine” Jesus Christ? There are lots of possibilities through coming to church and worshipping God? Through time spent together as a Christian Community? Small groups of Christians meeting together for encouragement and discussion, laughter and fellowship are important ways of feeling connected – if you are not part of a group and would like to be then speak to me. Through prayer - prayer meeting Tuesday morning, private prayer and bible reading; through service – follow in the way of Jesus. May be you need to do some searching and questioning? How are you connected to Jesus and his church – the vine and branches? Do those connections need strengthening?

Bearing fruit though is a slow process. Ian Fosten writes how he started up the Holy Island project in the 1990s – we went to Holy Island on pilgrimage a couple of times in the last decade. When he first arrived the church offered neither comfort, heat nor a toilet. Secondly the islanders were hostile and wary of turning it into some kind of religious theme park. He spent three years of hard graft immersing himself in building work, cautiously developing a ministry to visitors and participating in local island life. Then he gradually noticed two encouraging changes. First, the building was becoming alive as a focus for a worthwhile ministry and, second they had earned enough respect to be accepted a legitimate part of the local community.

Ian comments that living in God’s kingdom is rarely spectacular nor does it often bring instant rewards. It is, however, a way of living where prayer, love, commitment and holy graft are never wasted but are built carefully into healing hope and purpose for our broken world.

What was the fruit Jesus was talking about? Was it bringing more people to know and love God through Jesus? Was it the gift of love?

Certainly love is mentioned next in this passage. Verse 12 ‘my command is this**: love each other** as I have loved you’.

Ian Fosten remarks how Jesus offers us a virtuous circle of love. As I have loved you – so love each other. If you know you are loved, loved deeply, loved so much that the Son of God was prepared to give his life for you - - then hopefully that inspires you to love others – and a virtuous circle of love flows forth.

We are well aware of the vicious circle – a series of events or circumstances that involves inevitably a destructive end. We see it played out in the replicating tragedies of abuse and poverty or violent solutions to violent problems. Sin infects and destroys. You receive a hurt and then you hurt back and so the circle continues – sin flows.

The Bible speaks about the effects of grace through the life death and resurrection of Jesus God breaks that circle of sin and breaks it with love and opens up a better way to live through forgiveness and sacrificial love. Whereas a vicious circle contracts into an even tighter spiral of destruction this virtuous circle of love is designed to expand and draw ever more people into it.

Why do we not always choose the virtuous circle but always seem to fall into the vicious circle – because sin pulls us to taking the easy option whereas self-giving love requires us to make unconventional choices, take risks, gives up our pride as we follow Jesus rather than our own self-interest. Loving and forgiving like Jesus is not for the faint hearted – but then nothing in life of true and lasting value ever is.

Finally Jesus says that if we do all this we will no longer be called servants but **we will be called friends** for everything that he has learned from his Father he has made known to us (verse 15).

With the burgeoning social media the term ‘friend’ has been a little debased – it kind of means more like an acquaintance – someone you know – no matter how vaguely and remotely. And many people brag about how many ‘friends’ they have, how many followers they have.

There are many definitions of what a real friend is. Someone said it is the extent to which you can be at home and wholly yourself in the other person’s company. It is said that to have at least one real fiend in life like this is a real joy, a privilege and an anchor to our sanity. To have more than six real friends is unsustainable. You don’t have the time and energy to maintain so many real friends.

When Jesus used the term ‘friend’ he invested it with the significance of an apprenticeship completed, a level of trust and reliability achieved. It was characterised by attributes such as mutuality, vulnerability, intimacy and risk. To be a friend of Jesus is to be rewarded with the mixed privilege of joy and obligation by which his own burden of work and ministry could be shared. Being a real friend is always a mixed blessing – because you share in the joys and sorrows of another person, you may end up having fun together but also end up in costly love and hard work. This is the true quality of friendship that Jesus offers to all who truly would be his friends.

But the Lord Jesus trusts us enough to be counted among his friends. What a deep privilege. May we be genuine friends of Jesus.

He is the vine we are the branches – in our connectedness o Jesus and those how are called by him – there will be times of pruning, pruning is necessary in order to bear fruit; – it takes time to bear fruit; this s the fruit of love– so we can have the virtuous circle of love flowing in our world; in all these ways may we be called friends of Jesus.

**Questions:**

**Read John 15.1-17. What phrases stand out for you?**

**Pruning: looking back on your life – have the tough times made you more fruitful?**

**Bearing fruit: how do we remain in Christ, abiding in him? What works for you – what doesn’t? How does the church help or hinder in that?**

**Love one another: is it easier to hurt back or firgive back?**

**Called friends: what is your definition of a real friend?**

**Do you agree that Jesus has chosen us rather than we have chosen Jesus?**

**Prayer**

Help us Lord not ot be precious or overly protective of ourselves but to trust our lives to your pruning wisdom.

Help us to take the ordinary mundane encounters in our lives and offer them to you, that they may be real steps along the pilgrim way.

This day and every day make the work of our hands, the output of our mind and the offering of our love the sweet wine of your kingdom.

May we all now that whatever we do we are all engaged in full time Christian work, in the name of jesus.

May we know before the dawn of time that you our heavenly Father love us. Jesus died for us so great was his love for his friends. So encircle us Lord with your love, by your Holy Spirit. Shape us and bear in us your fruit of our saviours Love. Help us to forgive wrongs done to us. Help us not to pay back hurt with hurt. Where there is evil help us overcome with good. In such ways may we love as Jesus has loved us.

 May your circle of love transform the world.

Thankyou for trusting us enough lord Jesus to be counted as your friends. May we give thanks for those who are our friends and keep them precious in our lives.