

HIW 17.04.2016

### **The Gospel according to John, Ch. 15, vv. 1-8 (+ 9-17)**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup>... <sup>4</sup>Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>**I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you. <sup>8</sup>This is my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“The Bunch of Grapes” is a not unusual pub name in England. If you think about it, it is quite a strange name for an English pub, since there is really nothing very English about grapes; you certainly don’t find them growing in every garden. But then English pub names and pub signs are a science in themselves. A *proper* English pub has a name that can be represented as a picture, and a pub sign showing that picture. Some names, though picturesque, are relatively straightforward: the Red Lion, the White Horse, the King’s Arms. Others are extraordinary combinations that no-one can really explain: why are there a lot of pubs called “The Pig and Whistle”? And then there is “The Goat and Compasses”: another name that calls for an explanation. I remember a history lesson at school about the Puritan period, and all the things that were forbidden during it; and our teacher told us that one thing the Puritans did was to prevent places of worldly entertainment from bearing religious names, as they considered this to be blasphemous. And so the remarkably pious pub-name “God encompasseth us” got changed into “Goat and Compasses”. I have since learnt that this is unlikely to be true: but it’s a good story, and can anyone think of a better explanation for the name? And so, to go back to my starting point, as I thought about today’s Gospel reading, I found myself wondering: is it possible that “The Bunch of Grapes” as a pub name also used to have a concealed spiritual meaning, or at least an allegorical one? A bunch of grapes is a good symbol of belonging together, of “hanging together”, as one might say, and so of the kind

of togetherness in fellowship that one expects to find in a pub: perhaps, regrettably, more frequently than one expects to find it in a church.

Actually, a strange thing about this passage from John's Gospel is that grapes are not mentioned at all, or at least not directly by name; although it is quite possible, and perhaps many of us have done it, to read the passage a dozen times without noticing this; just as there are many people who hear the Christmas Gospel read every year, but have never noticed that there is no mention of an ox or an ass, or even of a stable, in it. In our case, Jesus tells of the vine and its branches; the grapes are mentioned only indirectly, insofar as the branches of the True Vine are expected to bear fruit; something they can only do if they remain attached to the vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches", Jesus says. But grapes or no grapes, the idea behind the image that Jesus presents to us is very clear: it is indeed about hanging together, about community, about relationship, about 'staying connected', as members of the digital generation might put it.

The relationship is between us, each of us individually, and Jesus, and through Jesus with the Father, the Great Gardener who tends the vine. It seems clear that this is a two-way relationship. On the one hand, the branches are tended, pruned and cleaned, so that they will bear fruit; but on the other hand the branches do not seem to be merely passive either; they have a responsibility too in the bearing of fruit, a responsibility summed up in the word "remain". Did you notice, I wonder, that the word "remain" comes no less than eleven times in the reading? This promised relationship is based on faithfulness, and a faithfulness that comes from both sides. "Remain in me, and I will remain in you".

It is important to see the context in which Jesus speaks these words to his disciples. The allegory of the True Vine forms part of those last discourses of Jesus to his disciples that are reported only in John's Gospel, discourses in which, at the conclusion of the Last Supper and immediately before he goes out to be betrayed and arrested, Jesus seeks to prepare his only half-understanding disciples for what is about to happen. He is going away from them, "going to the Father" [Jn 14, 12]: yet at the same time he will return to them and stay with

them: “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me” [Jn 16, 16]. In the situation of uncertainty that is coming, in the time when they do not see him, Jesus admonishes them to faithfulness, to “remain” and “stay connected” to the vine that he represents, to the growing plant, the source of life and vitality, which is the only way in which they can bear fruit.

What kind of fruit does Jesus mean, that his disciples are to bear? Paul in his Letter to the Galatians gives a useful list of what he calls “the fruits of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” [Gal. 5, 22]. At the top of this list, you will notice, stands “love”. In today’s Gospel, Jesus is not very concrete at first about what kind of fruit he is expecting. Only in the second half of the text does he leave behind the allegory of the vine and the branches and give something of an exposition of what he means by it. The wording develops in an interesting and illuminating way. Near the beginning Jesus says “Remain in me, and I will remain in you” [v.4]. In the third paragraph, while at first still keeping the emphasis on “remaining”, he develops the idea into something more transparent: “Now remain in my love; if you obey my commands you will remain in my love” [v.9-10]. And then he switches from the emphasis on “remaining” to an emphasis on love itself: “Love each other, as I have loved you” [v.12]. And near the end, just to make sure that we have got the point and understood the connection, he returns one last time to the vine allegory: “I appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last” [v.16]. These last words set off an alarm signal in my translator’s brain; and as I don’t know Greek, I asked Michael Klatt about it, and he told me that the Greek word translated here as “last” – “fruit that will last” – is the same word that has previously been translated eleven times as “remain”. I think that was a misjudgement on the part of the translator: he should have used the same word again for a twelfth time, as by not doing so he risks our missing that connection. Because our True Vine, unlike the merely natural ones whose fruit we eat – and drink – is one that will not only last for a long time, but will *remain* for eternity, tended as it is by the Great Gardener himself.

So how do we go about “remaining in him, as he in us”? As I have already said, the relationship between the vine and its branches is a relationship of belonging together, of community – indeed of “relationship” in the full sense of that word. Among the things that are required in conducting a relationship, whether between members of a family, between lovers or partners, or indeed within the working community of a business or an office, are above all communication, attentiveness and an involvement with the concerns of the others engaged in the relationship. Communication involves listening. “If my words remain in you...”, Jesus says; so our remaining in him involves listening to his words: as we read them in the Bible, as we hear them read and preached in church, or as we find them interpreted in the works not only of theologians, whether popular or academic, but of others whose lives have been touched by Him as well.

But in what, as I have already said, is clearly a two-way relationship, our communication involves not only listening but talking as well: which in this case means exercising ourselves in prayer. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you.” Now I have neither the time nor the theological expertise to go seriously into the issue of answers to prayer, which of course whole libraries have been written about. I can only say that I don’t imagine Jesus meant this on the level of the child who prays to be given a new bicycle at Christmas, and suffers a crisis of faith if he doesn’t get one – though even such a first experience of prayer may nevertheless make an important contribution to a more mature understanding later on. Prayer as I think most of us here will understand it is not a matter of praying for one’s own advantage, or for what one personally desires even when there are others whose interests are contrary, as would be the case if we were to pray for Hannover 96 to manage to stay in the 1st division, irrespective of what people in Frankfurt may wish. Prayer too is a two-way relationship; it involves both talking and listening to God, to discern his will and purposes and position ourselves in line with them: “Thy will be done” is the most fundamental prayer of all. You may know the Jewish joke in which one Jew says to his friend, “My Rabbi is so

powerful in prayer that he can force God to do his will.” The friend replies, “My Rabbi is so powerful in prayer that God can force *him* to do *His* will.”

So each of us may seek as an individual to remain in Him as a branch of His vine. But Jesus did not address this discourse just to one single follower: he gave it when his closest disciples were all together, sharing what was clearly a key moment in their fellowship with him. Now even though, as I said at the beginning, Jesus does not actually use that image of the bunch of grapes as a symbol of community and collectivity that so inevitably comes into our minds as we read this text, it is equally clear that no vine has only a single branch, and also, for that matter, that no branch of the vine produces only a single grape. That would look odd, wouldn't it? To bear fruit, the branch must remain on the vine *together with all the other branches*, forming that collectivity we call the Church; to remain in Him, we must remain together, showing ourselves to be his disciples. That is to say, we are all bound together in Him; the image of the vine with its branches is closely linked to that of the body with its many members that Paul explains in considerable detail [I Cor. 12]; we are all separate members of the Body of Christ, each with our own gifts, talents and vocations, yet all one in Christ who is our head. There the emphasis is on unity in diversity; in today's reading it is rather on unity in equality. But the message is the same, because it emphasises all the more that however diverse we may be, by culture, by race, by sex, by status, we are all equal branches of the True Vine, and there are only two kinds of branch: fruitful ones and unfruitful ones. And – I may be repeating myself here, but it is the crux of the matter – it is up to us to see that we *remain* fruitful branches: by remaining in him as he remains in us. By ensuring that his words remain in us; so that the Great Gardener will prune us, or clean us, keeping us in good shape so that the world will see that we are his disciples.

I said earlier that our text today is taken from the discourses of Jesus to his disciples after the Last Supper, before his betrayal and arrest. Now John's account of the Last Supper is very individual. In particular, it lacks what we generally consider to be the central element of that last love-feast before our

Lord's passion, namely what we call the institution of the Holy Communion, Christ's giving of himself, his body and blood to his disciples in the form of bread and wine, as we know it so well from the other Gospels, and also from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the wording of which we use in our own Holy Communion services: "On the night he was betrayed, he took bread", etc. [I Cor. 11, 23-26]. Why this central element of Christian faith and tradition is missing from the fourth Gospel, we can only speculate; but to me it does not feel like a mere coincidence that right at the place in John's narrative where we might have expected him to describe how Jesus took the cup and gave it to his disciples saying "This is my blood", we have instead this description of the True Vine and the community, or communion, it represents between Christ and his followers. It is as if John, instead of narrating that scene, is expounding its significance to us. When Jesus is no longer visibly present, we can nevertheless remain in him and he in us; we can receive his life-giving blood in the Holy Communion, and we can do so in the form of the drink produced from the fruit of the vine to which we must always remain attached, so that its life-giving juice, its juicy sap, can flow into us.

If we fail to remain attached to the vine, if we do not continue to hear his word, to address him in prayer and to share his love-feast, then we will indeed be like branches that wither and bear no fruit. I remember that in my student days – yes, I can remember them, though they are rather far away now – one subject that regularly came up in our discussion groups was that of whether one could be a solitary Christian, be a Christian without being a member of a Christian community: there was the archetypal figure of the individual who said "I am a Christian but I don't go to church". We were unanimous that this was not a true option: of course we were unanimous about it, otherwise we would not have been members of such discussion groups, the very purpose of which was community and sharing with our fellow Christians. It was clear to us – and indeed, it is still just as clear to me today, I have *remained* in that conviction all my life – that being a Christian is not merely a matter of abstract belief that Jesus Christ is

the Son of God, or even that he rose from the dead, but is a matter of belonging to him, being attached to him, remaining in community with him and with all the others who are equally attached to him in the living community that is his Church. If I am a disciple on my own, how shall the world know it, so that others may be won to follow him as well? And of course I *can* pray at home in my own small room; but community with others will show me the needs of the world, so that I know what I have to pray for. And if Jesus says “This is my command: Love each another”: how can I do that without being in a community of people who will receive that love?

In a few minutes it will be time for us to come to the Lord’s table; we can say: to receive his body and blood, or we can say: as branches of the True Vine, to allow the sap to flow into us that will bring fruit in our lives – that will develop into that bunch of grapes that symbolises not only our belonging together, but also the fruits of the Spirit, the greatest of which is love, that we are commanded to share with others, loving them as he has loved us. In my Bible commentary there is a mention of a tradition that St John, in extreme old age when he was too weak to preach, would be carried into church and would simply say to the people: “Little children, love one another”. Clearly he had received this as Christ’s great Commandment; as we gather round his table, may it be the same for us too. Amen.