



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Issue 17

Sunday 5th July 2020

Today's readings

Psalm 22: 25–31 (“A Psalm of David”)

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord.

May your hearts live for ever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it. Amen.

John 15: 1–11 (“Jesus, the true vine”)

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Beauty for brokenness (CH4: 259)

Christ the Lord is risen today (CH4: 411)

All things bright and beautiful (CH4: 137)

Christ's is the world (CH4: 724)

Be thou my vision (CH4: 465)

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2007 when our theme for the season was the “I am” sayings of Jesus in John’s gospel.

The Bible is filled with all sorts of teaching: from the Temple codes of the Old Testament, right through to the instructions on running a church in the late epistles of the New Testament. Yet you might be surprised to read today’s “I am” saying of Jesus and find that this saying itself offers teaching – on the subject of gardening. To be precise, it offers a brief and effective course on viticulture: the growing of vines.

In hot countries, grape vines were hugely important. A well kept vine might produce for its owner a tremendous crop of grapes, which in turn could be used for making wine. The best of that wine would be valued as a precious commodity to be used at the most special of celebrations. Just think of the story of the wedding feast at Cana: now, that was quite a celebration, and the drink of choice that day was wine which just got better and better.

But more than just being a beverage of celebration, wine had an important part to play in keeping the ancient world healthy. At a time when water was so unhygienic, the fermented juice of the grape offered a safer alternative which could be kept for years if necessary.

Vines were important, so it was crucial that people knew how to look after them. In John’s gospel, as I say, Jesus gives his listeners a lesson in tending those precious resources. As with all Jesus’ stories, however, the message here goes way beyond growing good fruit. The message concerns us and what it means for us to be “grafted into Christ”, as his followers.

When Jesus says those words, “I am the true vine,” he is presenting us with a very clear “I am” image. Across the range of “I am” sayings of Jesus in John’s gospel, we find pictures: of bread, of light, of a door, of a shepherd, and so on. But when it comes to Jesus declaring, “I am the vine”, he is presenting us with a very powerful picture indeed: a picture for us to conjure up in our minds; a picture for us to use in really rather deep ways.

What’s deep – what’s theological – about all this? Just remember that when we think about Jesus’ life, we are thinking about an entirely unique story: the experience of one who is both human *and* divine. It follows that Jesus’ life does not start on Christmas Day and end on Good Friday. Jesus Christ, we are told by John, was there at the dawn of Creation, coming to earth for a season then, after the Resurrection, ascending to heaven once more. So when Jesus says “I am the vine” we really need to be understanding that statement in terms not only of his time, but of *all* time: and that means *our* time too.

Jesus is painting this mental picture of a vine, encouraging his listeners to pay attention to what a vine is, and to what a vine does. In essence, a vine comes up from the earth and spreads far and wide, sending out its branches in all directions. These branches will take hold, develop, carry on growing and (in time) will hopefully bear much fruit. So the branch of a vine has a very active role within the plant, moving and establishing and growing and producing, all at some distance from the root system.

With that kind of image in the front of your mind, now let’s go back to a tiny line from Jesus himself. He says: “I am the vine, and *you* are the branches.” In the Church of Scotland’s Baptism service, you might recall that phrase about being “grafted into Christ”. That’s quite an idea: our lives taken into the greater life of Christ as, in faith, we turn to God. In effect, through God’s grace we become part of the real vine of Christ.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Yes, Jesus Christ is the all-important vine here, and, amazingly, we are the branches he sends out: the ones who will become bearers of fruit. As branches, we may go further and further out, but the great truth here is that no matter how far we grow, the fruit we bear is not our own fruit, but the fruit of the vine itself in which we have our very being.

What makes this picture so effective is that it helps us to understand truly what the Church is all about. In the post-Ascension world in which Jesus has returned to his heavenly Father, the disciples must realise that Christ is, in some deeply significant sense, still with them. More than this, they must realise that together, Christ is *in* them and *through* them. And so God's presence is to be found through the whole Church. From top to bottom, end to end, God is there. God is *right there*, giving life that is firmly rooted.

At first sight, this vine image seems to be a very positive one. We imagine that big, well-established vine spreading outwards, up and down, to left and to right, massive bunches of grapes hanging heavy upon its branches. Yet it has to be said that John's gospel develops this image in a frankly disturbing way. The story places a great deal of emphasis on breaking off unproductive branches and on pruning the vine as a whole to make it more and more productive. And that must give us pause for thought.

When Jesus says that God breaks off unproductive branches from the vine, that is pretty hard-hitting stuff for us to take in. Even the idea of God cutting back the branches to improve the fruit yield, is an idea we might not like to contemplate. The notion, nonetheless, is an important one: if we are happy to call ourselves followers of Christ, that status of being a Christian demands from us our commitment. Whether we are living branches of the vine or dead appendages will depend not on who we are or on what we do. It will depend, in fact, on whether or not *we remain part* of the vine of Jesus – whether or not, to use old-fashioned language, we “abide in Christ”.

What is the use of us going through the motions of faith if we do not understand that we are to view ourselves as dependent on our Saviour? You want to bear fruit? Then remain united to Jesus. Stay close to God's love, and enjoy being a branch of that great vine. Enjoy it, for that is where true fellowship with Christ is to be found.

In our world of today, so many people are casual about so many things: casual in their relationships; casual in their approach to work or to study; casual in their commitment to those things that could give them deeper meaning in life. It seems that “belonging” to something went out of fashion ages ago. The message of John's gospel, then, is profoundly counter-cultural for us in our 21st century in which the individual so often takes first place. We are told that *faith in Christ matters* and that we must take our commitment seriously.

Jesus sums it up well: “My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.”

In conclusion then, let us try our best to get a proper sense of what this “I am” saying of Jesus is really all about. This is not a case merely of our coercion into submission before God. This is a call to real, lifelong commitment for the good of the Kingdom of God. If we remain firm and reliable branches in the vine of Christ, then God will use us to bear fruit in his Church and in our world. Isn't that a vine worth being grafted into?

Amen.

Praying for others

Let us pray:

God of life, our true vine,
You call us to be your branches, to reach and grow and see your love blossom
through us, as we cultivate your Kingdom here on Earth.

In the throes of a global pandemic your vine continues to reach out in love,
despite the distances between us.

To those whose dedication has kept our key services running, we say thank you.
To those who have found suitable ways to serve food to those who
would otherwise go hungry, we say thank you.

To those who reach out in friendship on the phone, or with groceries, or with cake,
we say thank you.

Remind us that there are as many ways to be a branch on your vine
as there are people on your earth.

Help us to see what we have to offer from your vine of love.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill reflects on our forthcoming summer services:

Over a whole lot of years the congregations of Gladsmuir linked with Longniddry have organised summer services that are just a bit shorter than usual, with a theme running through each one. This offers us a spot of variety in our church year.

In the summer of 2020, with lockdown regulations still in place (if, thankfully, appearing to be a little less stringent week by week) we are going to use our Zoom technology to bring us interviews with folk who are known to our two congregations. This “Questions of Faith” season kicks off this Sunday (5th July) as I talk with our old friend Douglas Hamilton, who had been our “student attached” in 2018–19. Douglas has a wealth of experience in the charities sector, having headed up the Scottish division of Save the Children for several years. Our recorded chat will range across issues concerning child poverty in Scotland today.

The following weeks will see guests tackling exactly the same ten questions of faith, though offering a wide range of answers based on markedly different topics. Some subjects will lie close to home (Tom Gordon on bereavement care) while others will look at justice far from home (Kerry Reilly on the plight of the Palestinian people). Over the course of these couple of months, we’ll see what different answers the same ten questions can elicit from a fascinating list of expert interviewees.

But ... what will happen if our interview recordings break down? What if we find ourselves without anything to fill the sermon slot? Fear not! I will keep my trusty copy of *The Sunday Focus* at my side, ready and able to provide our internet congregation with an address taken from my summer service archive. (This week it is taken from 2007.)

One way or another, it promises to be a lively July and August in church.