

I am the true vine, John 15. 1. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 9 June 2010.

Our subject for this morning is the last of our Lord's great 'I am' claims recorded in John's gospel; namely 'I am the vine'. And our reading consists of a few short extracts from John chapter 15.

'I am the true vine', Jesus said. 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me ... bears much fruit. ... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit ... As the Father loved me, I also have loved you; abide in my love'.

In our Lord's day, vineyards were very much a common feature of the landscape of Israel – as they still are. The word picture which Jesus drew for His disciples of Himself as 'the vine' was therefore very familiar to them. But it was familiar to them for another reason – which is why He described Himself, not only as the 'vine', but as the 'true' – the 'real', the 'genuine' – vine.

For, in doing so, our Lord was contrasting Himself with the nation of Israel, which had been depicted many times in the Old Testament as a vine. For instance, when rehearsing how God led the people of Israel out of Egypt and established them in the land of Canaan, the author of Psalm 80 wrote, 'You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it ... and it took deep root and filled the land'.¹

And, over time, the vine became a national symbol of Israel, much as the dragon is a national symbol of Wales, the lion of England and the rising sun of Japan. And in the periods both before and after our Lord's day, coins minted in Israel very often bore the symbol of the vine.² Again, according to historians of the first century – both Roman and Jewish – the Temple which then stood in Jerusalem was adorned with a large golden vine over its doors.³ One of these historians, Flavius Josephus, tells us that it 'spread out', with 'its branches hanging down from a great height', and that its 'clusters of grapes' were 'as tall as a man'. This golden vine was, he added, a marvel to all, on account both of its size and its 'fine workmanship'.

We cannot be sure but, given that our Lord had urged His disciples at the close of the previous chapter to, 'Rise up, let us go', it is at least possible that He and His disciples immediately left the Upper Room and were now on their way towards the Kidron Valley and the Garden of Gethsemane. In all likelihood, their walk would take them past the huge Temple gates and it may well be that the gold leaf of the vine then caught the light of the Passover moon, and served to emphasize our Lord's words ... that He, and not the nation of Israel, was the true vine.

Because, alas, Israel had long failed miserably in its role as a vine. For as the nation's own prophets had noted centuries before, 'the vineyard of the Lord' had yielded only 'wild grapes',⁴ and God's 'choice vine' had become 'a degenerate and wild vine' – producing no fruits of righteousness, of truth or of heartfelt worship for Him.

But, our Lord claimed, He was the genuine vine ... the One who had very much brought forth His fruit in His season for God's delight. As we just read, He told His disciples, 'By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit'. And nobody ever bore such fruit for God as He did. Small wonder therefore that He was able to pray a short time later, 'I have glorified you on the earth'.⁵

And what was this fruit for which God looked? The apostle Paul put his finger on it when he wrote, and I quote, 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'. And every one of these lovely traits of character was seen to perfection in the life and ways of our Lord Jesus.

Indeed, I note that He referred to the first three virtues ... 'love, joy, peace' ... at that very time. We read of the first: 'Abide in *my love*', He said. And then added, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends'.⁶ And what a thought that is! On Monday morning, Linda and I were discussing the words of a well-known hymn, written over 300 years ago by Samuel Crossman ...

'My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be,
O, who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?'⁷

'Love to the *loveless* shown' ... with the meaning, no doubt, 'love to the *unlovely* shown'. How very true! Small wonder that in the very next verse of his hymn, Mr Crossman exclaims, 'This is my Friend, my Friend indeed'.

'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace'. And while here with His disciples, our Lord spoke not only of His love, but of His joy – 'These things I have spoken to you, that *my joy* may remain in you'⁸ – and of His peace – 'Peace', He said, 'I leave with you, *my peace* I give to you'.⁹ And we remember that He spoke of His joy and peace only hours before His betrayal and crucifixion.

And indeed, not these three only – love, joy and peace, but all nine manifestations of the Spirit's fruit were displayed supremely throughout our Saviour's life down here.

But, as no doubt you noticed, the Lord not only spoke of Himself as the 'true vine' – as the real thing – but of His disciples – His followers – as the branches. And in so doing He drew a beautiful picture of the living union which exists between Him – the now risen Lord – and every one of His people.

For, as in a vineyard, the vine is the main trunk of the plant, and the branches depend on the vine for their life and fruitfulness, so it is, spiritually, with Christ and His people. He – and He alone – is the source of our life and our salvation.

But, Jesus made it clear, if we are to bear the fruit of the Spirit – if we are to be conformed to our Lord's image and character – then we must 'abide', as He said, in Him. That is, we must walk with Him each day, sharing His company, maintaining close and constant fellowship with Him.

And, with shame, I have to confess that I know far, far too little of this. But let me tell you of someone very different.

Many of you are familiar with the name George Müller. In a nutshell, Mr Müller lived and died in the eighteenth century, spending most of his life in Bristol. While there, he cared for over 10,000 orphans, most of whom passed through five large orphanages he erected at Ashley Down.¹⁰

And the remarkable thing is that he did all this entirely by prayer and faith.

Today is the 9th of June. In one sense, George Müller's work began on the 12th of June ... in the year 1833, when he was not yet twenty-eight years old. It occurred to him to gather out of the streets, at about eight o'clock each morning, the poor children, give them a bit of bread for breakfast, and then, for about an hour and a half, to teach them to read or to read to them the Holy Scriptures.¹¹

To cut a long story short, Mr Müller began the orphanages at Ashley Down with only two shillings in his pocket. But in answer to prayer – and without making his needs known to any others – he received all the finance necessary to erect the five great buildings ... and to feed the orphans day by day for sixty years. Many times, he received unsolicited food donations only hours before they were needed to feed the children. There is one well-documented occasion when they actually gave thanks for breakfast with all the children sitting at the table, even though there was nothing to eat in the house. As they finished praying, the baker knocked on the door with sufficient fresh bread to feed everyone.

And Mr Müller's secret? Keep in mind our Lord's words, 'He who abides in me ... bears much fruit', and let Mr Müller tell us in his own words ... 'I live in the spirit of prayer', he once wrote, 'I pray as I walk about, when I lie down and when I rise up. And the answers are always coming'.¹²

How much we who profess to know and love the Lord Jesus should cultivate a closer and more constant communion with our Saviour.

But first we must ensure that we *are* indeed numbered among His people. And how do we do that? John spells it out very clearly for us in his gospel. 'To as many as received Him (the Lord Jesus)', he wrote near its beginning, 'He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name', and, towards its end, he penned the words, 'These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name'. But, in the end, it all comes down to our own personal response. Our Lord once needed to say to some of His day, 'You will not come to me, that you might have life'.¹³

What a terrible condemnation, 'You will not'. I don't know if you are aware of it, but today has been advertised as 'Free Wills Day', because, for today only, the Institute of Professional Willwriters offered 700 free appointments for folk to obtain a legally worded will at no charge. Yes, all very nice. But remember that God has given us all 'free wills' – by which we can either accept or reject His offer of eternal salvation. Be wise, if you haven't already done so, receive the Lord Jesus as your Saviour and with Him God's offer of salvation today.

Footnotes

¹ Psa. 80.8-9.

² Coins minted in Israel both in the Maccabean period and during the time of Israel's revolt against Rome in AD 68-70, bore the vine symbol.

³ 'A golden vine was found in the temple', Tacitus (AD 56-117), *Histories*, Book 5, Paragraph 5.

'The temple had doors also at the entrance, and lintels over them, of the same height with the temple itself. They were adorned with embroidered veils, with their flowers of purple, and pillars interwoven; and over these, but under the crown-work, was spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the largeness and fine workmanship of which was a surprising sight to the spectators, to see what vast materials there were, and with what great skill the workmanship was done', Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 15, Chapter 11, Paragraph 3. 'That gate which was at this end of the first part of the house was, as we have already observed, all over covered with gold, as was its whole wall about it; it had also golden vines above it, from which clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man's height', Flavius Josephus (AD 37-100), *Wars of the Jews*, Book 5, Chapter 5, Paragraph 4.

⁴ Isa. 5. 1-4.

⁵ John 17. 4.

⁶ John 15. 13-14.

⁷ Samuel Crossman (1624-84).

⁸ John 15. 11.

⁹ John 14. 27.

¹⁰ It is estimated that he was also responsible for the education of more than 100,000 children, for distributing almost 300,000 Bibles and a million and a half New Testaments, as well as for supporting about 150 missionaries.

¹¹ See <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26522/26522-h/26522-h.htm>

¹² See http://realheroes.net/reformers/George_Mueller.html

¹³ John 5. 40.