

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Christ Church, Crouch End Hill

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No: 90

"The Vine and the branches"

Brief Talk on John 15: 1-12

General Introduction

Christ is the vine. It is He that nourishes our hungry spirits. We seek in vain when we look for nourishment in other places. A cartoon showed a man standing in a bar in a very sombre mood. He said to his drinking companion, "I come in here to drown my sorrows, but they've learned to swim." There are some people who will seek what they need in their neighbourhood bar. Some will seek it sitting in front of a television set hour after hour after hour. Others will look for it in art, in philosophy and some in bizarre personal indulgences. All other streets except that marked Christ, however, are dead end.

The vine and the branches' relationship teaches us something of what our relationship to Christ is like. It teaches a Christ centrality. Whenever we forget that Christ is the heart of everything, everything goes crooked. This is true of preaching, teaching, family life, vocation -- everything. Sometimes in meetings and discussions among Christians, I wish we could stop and ask, "Where does Christ fit into all of this?"

One of the great evidences of the aliveness of Christ in our church and lives is his centrality in all we do and say. As we go out into the community to tell the good news to others, it must not be to feed our own ego or to get church members for our "fine church." Rather, Christ must be central; we go and witness because we love him who loves us. We go because we know the joy of being in him and want to share that privilege with others, and because we know the One who saves and wants others to know him, too.

As we serve in the church, singing in the choir, helping with the services in various ways, serving on a committee, leading study groups, we don't do it for our own gratification, but for Christ's. If Christ is the vine and we are his branches, then how we treat the people who live next door to us becomes a religious issue. How we raise our children, how we relate to our spouse, parents friends and members of the church are all critical issues for us who live from the vine. When Christ is central: revenge changes to support, hate turns to love, greed moves to sharing, and "me first" becomes "after you". Not only that -- to be a branch of the vine and have Christ as central means: we can relax because we have the source of life; we can forgive because we have been forgiven; we can share because he provides all we need; we can care because he shows the way.

Questions for discussion

1. Jesus' instruction to his disciples in this passage revolves around three symbols—the vine, the gardener and the branches. What is Jesus trying to communicate by calling himself the “true vine”?

2. What is the significance of calling his disciples “branches”?

3. Instead of commanding us to bear fruit, why is Jesus' only command “Remain in me” (v.4)?

4. (a) What does it mean to remain in Christ? (b) Jesus repeats “remain in me”, “love” and “bearing fruit.” How are these words related? (c) How dependent is the branch on the vine? (vv.4b-6)

Note: Over and over we are asked to “... remain in me (v. 4).” Paul often talks about this same idea in a mystical way. We are to be in Christ and Christ in us. It is when we remain united to Christ that we are then capable of producing good fruit in our lives. As long as we are far from him all the other interests of the world sap all our talents and energy. Because it is only Christ who not only supplies the strength but also the motivation to do his will.

It's dangerous to allow ourselves to “wither on the vine” and to lose contact with Christ and his Church. Every congregation has a number on its rolls who are called “dead wood” or the inactive. These are the people who have allowed themselves to get away from the vine and get outside living in Christ.

The vine is like a family tree. We are part of that family of God. The secret of the life of Jesus was his contact with God, his Father. Again and again, he withdrew into some solitary place to meet God. “Jesus was always united to God. It must be so with us.

We must keep contact with him as we take definite steps to do so." This is the reason for regular weekly worship and for daily devotions. It's the reason the church always offers Bible study and retreats and other ways to continually deepen and strengthen our spiritual lives and our connection with the vine.

5. (a) The fruit produced by the "remaining branch" is sometimes viewed as a reference to new converts. But branches produce grapes, not other branches. What other possible meanings are there for fruit?

6. (a)The Father's ministry as the gardener is to "[cut] off every branch ... that bears no fruit" (v.2). What do you think that means? (b)If you are not bearing fruit, what is Jesus' counsel to you in these verses?

7. (a) The Father prunes fruitful branches to make them more fruitful (v.2) In what ways have you experienced the Father's "pruning," and what were the results? (b) What spiritual benefits result from remaining in Christ?

8. According to vv. 7and 8 what are some of the benefits of remaining in the vine?

Conclusion

How do we remain in Jesus, or 'abide' in him? It is so basic that it almost comes as an anti-climax.

First of all, we listen to Jesus teaching- v 7 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you....' The remaining in Jesus and his words go together. In verse 3 Jesus says that his true followers are already 'clean because of the word (singular) I have spoken to you.' That is how you become a Christian. It is also the way you keep on remaining a Christian, by allowing his words to become part of you. Think of how many 'words' will have come your way just in the past week: words from friends, teachers, parents. Words from the TV, the radio, the CD, ipods. Words through books, internet, newspapers, magazines, billboards. To a greater or lesser extent those words will have shaped the person you have become. Your mind and outlook, your vocabulary and values have been changed because of those words. That is the way words work. Now how many of those words, have been words from God? Words read in the Bible, words from preached sermons, words from Christian books? I would hazard a guess and say only a fraction. Should we therefore be so surprised that God sometimes seems distant and our faith illusory if he is not winning the battle of words? That is why those homegroups and bible studies are so vital; why sermons are not an optional extra and why we have at least two preached on a Sunday. They enable us to remain in Christ by his words getting into us. God speaking to us-that is how we abide in him, mull over his words, savour them, trust them and -obey them.

Secondly as his words dwell in us, our words reach up to him-v 7, 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish...'. Now it is significant that the invitation to ask whatever we wish follows on from allowing Jesus words to remain in us because as we get to know God more closely and discover what his desires so are we able to pray more in accordance with those desires. If we are in this intimate relationship with the true Vine, then what characterised Christ's prayers will characterise ours. And if you want to know what sort of things those are then look at John chapter 17, and there we see how he longs to see God glorified and that comes through Jesus having authority in the world.