



“Stay connected”

A service of reflection for Sunday 2nd May 2021

Introduction

We have reached the fifth Sunday after Easter. John’s gospel tells how Jesus invited his disciples to “abide in me” and gave them the image of a growing plant saying: “I am the vine” and “you are the branches”. This week we are thinking about how we stay connected to God and to each other and how we grow and bear fruit.

Call to worship

Come apart, pause, and leave your stresses at the door.
Come and reconnect with God. Remain in him and grow.
Grow closer, grow deeper. Grow and be fruitful.
Come and glorify God!

Hymn: Morning has broken (*Singing the Faith* 136)

1 Morning has broken
like the first morning ;
blackbird has spoken
like the first bird.
Praise for the singing !
Praise for the morning !
Praise for them, springing
fresh from the Word !

2 Sweet the rain’s new fall
sunlit from heaven,
like the first dewfall
on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness
of the wet garden,
sprung in completeness
where his feet pass.

3 Mine is the sunlight !
Mine is the morning
born of the one light
Eden saw play !
Praise with elation,
praise every morning,
God’s re-creation
of the new day !

Eleanor Farjeon (1881–
1965)



The rhubarb and raspberry
bushes in the manse garden, April
2021

Prayer

True God, true vine, strength of all our being,
giver of all good gifts, healer of all that is broken:
we worship you;
we glorify you;
we rejoice in you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Gracious God,
we come to you aware of our failings and conscious that we have tried to live in our own strength.

Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.

We have resisted the challenge of change and not trusted your truth.

Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.

We have rooted ourselves in our wills and not in your word.

Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.

We have looked for quick fixes and not kingdom-shaped growth.

Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord, we thank you that when our faith becomes straggly, you prune it with your wisdom; when it becomes malnourished, you nurture it with your grace; when it becomes brittle, you strengthen it with your truth; when it becomes barren, you restore it with your life-giving energy, forgiveness and love. **Amen.**

Setting the scene

Jesus' parable of the true vine draws on the prophet Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5.1ff), where God's planting symbolises 'the house of Israel and the people of Judah'. In the book of John's gospel, Jesus speaks these words about the vine at the last supper before his death. The first disciples had faced adversity and there was more to come. In addition, these words, like everything Jesus says in chapters 13–17 of John, speak also to his later followers. Those followers of Jesus in the early church would have heard what Jesus says as words of the crucified and risen Christ addressing their particular situation. John's readers were most likely in a situation where hostility between the local synagogue and the Jesus community was poisoning relationships. 'I am the true vine' has the power to reframe this adversity. The world, represented by the local synagogue, may subject them to violence, but they are still God's true planting, the object of his tender care and love. The hostility they endure may serve to sharpen their sense of this.

Bible passage (John 15: 1-11 Jesus speaks to his disciples)

15 "I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so it will be clean and bear more fruit. **3** You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. **4** Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. **6** Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. **8** My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit. In this way you become my disciples. **9** I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. **10** If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11 "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Reflection "Stay connected"

We don't have a vine in the manse garden but our rhubarb (pictured above) is producing a bountiful harvest this year. I have had rhubarb and ice cream and rhubarb on my porridge for breakfast! It is wonderful when a plant is fruitful. Even if you don't have a garden or grow plants inside, I hope you are enjoying seeing the cherry blossom and other plants outside. In time I hope you, like me, will enjoy the fruits of the plants from many gardens and orchards and farms.

It is interesting how, when Jesus wanted to describe the life of his followers, he turned to this image of the living, growing vine plant producing such delicious fruit. Even those of us who don't drink wine will appreciate grape juice and all the scones, Christmas cakes and even Yorkshire fat rascal buns containing the dried grapes of raisins or sultanas.

For the first followers of Jesus, conditions were making it hard for them to be fruitful. They were facing adversity. So Jesus' explanation that in order to flourish they needed to stay united to him, comes to help them. In today's language: they needed to stay connected. And to stay connected not only to him but to each other. For also, in his words to his disciples at this time, Jesus encourages them to love one another.

Conditions for us too have been very difficult. We were facing adversities even before the current pandemic started. How do we flourish and keep being fruitful when times are so hard?

Jesus encourages his disciples to abide in him, to stay connected. We can do this through prayer and reading the Bible, and reading the reflections of other followers of Jesus. Or, if reading is difficult for us, we can listen to CDs, the radio and TV where there are services and programmes about faith. Many of us would ordinarily like to attend services in a church building which, of course, has not been possible for much of the last year. At Christchurch we have continued to prepare worship services and if you are reading this you have remained connected by receiving these services. Thank you! Others have remained connected by attending worship through the internet. Others have watched our recordings on their computers in their own time. Others have tapped into church services produced elsewhere and yet still helped out with the running of our church as they are able to do.

We have tried to stay connected to each other through cards and letters and phone calls and even the occasional meet up outside. For many of us, staying connected to each other helps us to stay connected to Jesus. And when we do stay connected it produces something beautiful and fruitful for God like a succulent vine or a rampant rhubarb bush. Things have been difficult. Most of us have felt very vulnerable at points, so being reminded we are part of something beautiful and worthwhile may encourage us.

I hope. even if you have not seen anyone from church for a while and not been able to join services in our building, you still feel connected. You are an important part of God's garden here in Ilkley. May God help us to stay united to him and to each other. May we encourage other people also and, in that, bear good fruit. Amen.

A reflective prayer which may help us feel rooted in Jesus

A meditation on 'I am the vine'. Read it slowly with significant pauses after each line.

I am the vine.
I am your origin, your nutrients, your mainstay.
Root yourself in me.
Let yourself be fed.
Let yourself grow...closer and deeper.
And in the growing, allow the pruning.
Allow me to prune, to trim, to cut away your broken branches,
your fruitless parts,
your strivings,
branches that are going to seed.
And watch and wait.
Wait for the new shoots.
Wait for the new fruits to bud slowly and open gently.
Turn to my warmth, and let your fruits open in my glory.
Amen.

Prayers for ourselves and others:

God of love,
thank you we are all connected to you, our true vine. When we feel disconnected from our communities, families or even ourselves help us to picture this image of the vine and feel rooted in you; your comfort, justice, truth, community, hope and compassion.
God of love, **listen to our prayer.**

God of comfort,
as India faces the ravages of corona virus, we pray for some relief for their suffering. May those in this world who have an excess of medicine and oxygen be moved to generosity. May those who face great anguish find some measure of comfort. Even as our situation with the virus changes here, we are mindful of the many families across this country who are still trying to come to terms with the death of a loved one. We pray for everyone struggling with

the pain of loss. Bring solace to them. Bring people who can offer words and actions to sooth. Help all those who grieve to find small shoots of hope for the future.

God of comfort, **listen to our prayer.**

God of truth,

the recent tension in parliament and the complications around truth and honesty can be difficult for us to process. We pray for a spirit of openness and fairness for those elected to govern us. Renew their vision for their role in society and bring people into the centre of government who have a spirit of service and integrity. Help those who make decisions to see the true plight of the poorest and most disadvantage in our society and help them.

God of truth, **listen to our prayer.**

God of community,

we acknowledge the wide variety of feelings within our local communities prompted by the change to the lock down. From those who are exhilarated by trips to the hairdressers or garden centre, to others who remain anxious about the possibility of a new surge, may we find understanding and empathy for one another. Give us all the ability to think in terms of the whole community, not just about ourselves. Help us keep our eyes wide open to truly see how those around us are coping as things change.

God of community, **listen to our prayer.**

God of hope,

as the spring days bring new hopefulness, may we not forget those for whom this past year has been particularly devastating. Thank you for the work the church has undertaken in order to feed, comfort and intercede for those in need, but give us the patience and endurance needed to continue the work. Prevent us from becoming fatigued or bored by the endless cycle of need to which we need to respond. Rather, re-energise us. Inspire and envision us for new ways we can bring the kingdom of heaven to earth and hope to the people in it.

God of hope, **listen to our prayer.**

Amen. The Lord's prayer

Hymn O Jesus I have promised (*Singing the faith 563*)

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| 1 O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end ;
Lord, be for ever near me,
my master and my friend ;
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide. | 3 O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will ;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control ;
Lord, speak, and make me listen,
O guardian of my soul. |
| 2 O let me feel you near me ;
the world is ever near ;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear ;
my foes are ever near me,
around me, and within ;
but, Jesus, now draw nearer,
and shield my soul from sin. | 4 O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too ;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end ;
O give me grace to follow
my master and my friend. |

John Ernest Bode (1816–1874)

Blessing

God abides in us and we abide in God. So, as we go forth this reflective time, may our God of goodness and nurture, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, stay with us, as we stay with him now and always. **Amen.**