

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 28 April 2024 - The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Lectionary Readings (*depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on*)

Baruch 3.9-15 and 32-Chapter 4.4 or Genesis 22.1-18; Acts 8.26-end (this must be either first or second reading); Psalm 22.25-end; 1 John 4.7-end; John 15.1-8.

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Michael Wilcockson, Assistant Curate - Associate Priest, Linton (Benefice) and Rural Dean of Granta

Imagine you are one of the disciples at Jesus' last supper. These disciples and you are steeped in the Jewish and now Christian history and faith. Go into the room with the other disciples. Jesus takes the cup of wine and with words you have heard countless times says the Jewish blessing: 'Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, Creator of the fruit of the vine'.

You sip the cup of wine as it is passed round, and as you do, you reflect that the prophets and the Psalms often referred to Israel as the vine and God the vine-grower; drinking the wine reminds you of that special relationship you as a Jew have with God. You remember how the Psalmist says, 'you, God, brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it' (Psalm 80:8) and you recall Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard with its exquisite opening, 'My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill ...' (Isaiah 5:1). But in each of these verses you recall you are a branch of the vine, a member of Israel; however, as a nation all have fallen short. Jeremiah lamented this: God, he said, chose Israel as a pure vine, but the people have degenerated and become a 'wild vine' (Jeremiah 2:21) through their sin and guilt. No wonder the prophet Ezekiel compared the people to be worthless wood of the vine, fit only to be burnt (Ezekiel 15: 4-6).

And then while you are reflecting on this Jesus says the startling words, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower' (John 15:1). This changes everything. 'Surely,' you think, 'Jesus should have said, "we"; we are the true vine, we are members of God's chosen community'. Then it dawns on you, how can we be the true vine or Jeremiah's pure vine, when we have fallen and will continue to fall short. That is why Jesus is, of course, the true or real vine!

As you continue to listen, Jesus says something very familiar, 'God removes every branch that bears no fruit ... such branches are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned'. Of course, there will be those, just as Ezekiel had commented, who will fail to live up to Jesus' example. These are Jeremiah's 'wild vines' who profess to be Christian but who fall woefully short.

But then he says something which makes you catch your breath. ‘Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit’. What does that mean? Does Jesus really mean that even those who live the life of a good disciple will be cut off from the life in him? If so, what hope is there for ordinary people? And me?

However, Jesus then adds something else, and his teaching begins to fall into place, ‘You have already been cleansed by the word I have spoken to you’, he says. Cleansing – that’s the key! Burning and pruning are the same idea, they are referring to the process of change and purity of intention. When Jesus washed our feet earlier in the evening, he did it as a symbol of purifying our relationship with God *and with each other*. That is what it means to be a branch bearing good fruit; someone who *lives* the life of a disciple in thought and word and deed.

So, Jesus’ teaching as the true vine is both a warning and an encouragement. Even good intentions need purifying. You know the saying that the way to hell is paved with good intentions. That’s because an intention itself is not enough. I can intend to be kind, but unless I consistently practise kindness then the intention is void. Each week we review our intentions in the Prayer of Humble Access which begins, ‘We do not presume to come to this your table...’ and then ask Christ to wash our souls ‘through his most precious blood’.

By ‘pruning’ or cleansing our intentions we enable ourselves to live fuller and more fruitful lives in Christ. Unfortunately, by contemporary Western standards, purity of intention is not the way many people judge what is morally good. What seems to matter is that actions are good as long as they produce happiness and avoid harm.

But that implies that even lying, cheating and stealing may be justified providing they have caused no actual harm. That’s because according to some people lying, cheating and stealing are relative and are not intrinsically wrong. However, from Jesus’ teaching on purity of intention aiming only to minimise harm fails in every respect to develop oneself as a person of integrity in relation to God and to our neighbour. That is what Jesus means when he tells us to abide in him as the true vine.

Imagine you are one of the disciples at Jesus’ last supper. Jesus takes the cup of wine, and having said the traditional blessing, he then says, ‘I am the true vine... abide in me as I abide in you’. You now know that to follow Christ you must daily purify your intentions in thought and word and deed so that you might dwell in him and he in you.

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder what Jesus meant when he told us to 'abide in me as I abide in you'?
- I wonder what you might feel if Jesus said to you, 'You have already been cleansed by the word I have spoken to you'?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what the vine could really be?
- I wonder who the branches of vine are referring to?
- I wonder why Jesus said, 'I am the true vine'? (Hint: why did **not** say 'We are the true vine'?)
- I wonder what Jesus meant when he said, 'Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit'?
- I wonder what it means to have pure intentions in our daily lives?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

To be doers of God's word

O Lord, we most humbly beseech you, give us grace not only to be hearers of the Word, but also doers; not only to love but also to live your gospel; not only to profess, but also to practise your blessed commandments, to honour of your blessed name. Amen. (A prayer of Thomas Becon)

For abiding in Christ

Lord Jesus, thank You for being the true vine that sustains and nourishes our spiritual lives. Help us to recognize our need to remain connected to You and to abide in Your love. Strengthen our faith and enable us to bear fruit that glorifies the Father and impacts the world around us. Teach us to prioritize our relationship with You, trusting that You are the source of our spiritual growth and fruitfulness. In Your name, we pray. Amen.

(<https://dailybible.net/jesus-the-true-vine/>)

For pure intentions

Heavenly Father, You are a Just God, fair in Your dealings and impartial with Your judgments. I pray for Your wisdom and guidance as I try to resolve a personal conflict I have with someone. Guide my words to be gentle and assuring and not confrontational. Teach me to overcome evil with continual goodness. Help me to patiently show persistent kindness even when hostility is shown to me. Bless me, O God, with the patience to graciously resolve this conflict with kind heartedness. Amen.

(<https://prayerist.com/prayer/intentions>)

Suggested hymns/songs

The Church's one foundation

Ubi caritas

O Jesus I have promised

Be still my soul

Come down O love divine

O Jesus I have promised

Love divine, all loves excelling

I am the vine, ye are the branches

I am the holy vine

Blessed assurance

<https://truevinemusic.com/you-are-the-vine/>

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.org/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)