

**Readings:**

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Romans 12: 1-13

John 15: 1-17

**What does it mean to be church?**

I'm sure if I say 'vine' most of you will immediately think – perhaps even hear – 'wine'. Well, that's not so bad – our Lord himself was well-known as a wine-bibber.

I want to start by talking about the vine. We'll come to the produce later. Vines were an important part of Jewish agriculture. In a land where drinkable water was relatively scarce, wine was more commonly drunk than water. A cup of clean cold water was a precious thing whereas ordinary wine was an everyday commodity. Vines therefore had economic value as well as being valued for their produce, and were a familiar feature of the landscape.

In our first reading from Isaiah, we see the idea that the Jewish nation was a vine planted by God. Several times in the Old Testament there are references to Israel as a vine, usually in negative terms, as in that reading from Isaiah. God had planted the vine – had brought the nation of Israel into existence. He had cared for it and watched it grow, done all that a careful vine dresser would do, only to find that the produce was no good. God looked and saw only bloodshed and injustice.

In the New Testament, one of Jesus' parables uses the vine metaphor in a different way. The vine is still Israel but now it is those in charge of the vine who are at fault. In Mark's gospel, 12: 1-11 we read how the owner of the vine, that is God, sent his servants to collect the produce but were killed by the vine workers, until in the end he sent his son who was also killed. Jesus told this parable against the Pharisees and they understood what he meant – that over the years the prophets had been sent by God to guide the leaders of the nation back into a right relationship with God, but were killed for their efforts, and now God's son was among them and was also being rejected, and would be killed. Israel, the vine, had become corrupted and turned from the work God had given it – which was to be in a right relationship with him and to make him known in the world beyond Israel so that in the fullness of time all nations would worship at Jerusalem (Jeremiah 3:17).

So, when Jesus spoke to the disciples about the vine, as in our gospel reading, it was a metaphor which would have been familiar to them. Jesus tells them that he is the true vine – renewing the corrupted vine of the people of Israel which had failed to produce the fruit of bringing in the nations, and had failed to live rightly following God's ways.

We should remember that Jesus didn't have in mind the church as we know it. He wasn't thinking in terms of a new separate body of people who were outside the Jewish faith. His vision was of a renewed Jewish faith and the coming of the Kingdom which would begin with the resurrection. We understand the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost as the beginning of the church, and while that may be a moment we can point to, the believers at that time were Jewish, followed the Jewish faith and practices, and would not have seen themselves as a separate movement from Judaism apart from recognising that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. A split did come but not until perhaps forty years later, with the fall of the Temple in AD 70, when the leaders of the church moved to Antioch for safety. The church at the beginning was a movement within Judaism, not

something separate. Eventually the different beliefs about Jesus led to an irreconcilable rift and the Way, as it was known, became the Christian church.

So if the metaphor of the Vine is not about the church what is it about? I think essentially it's about our relationship with Jesus – and that is something which exists quite separately from our membership of the church. It's perfectly possible to be a member of a church but all the while not having a relationship with Jesus. People come to church for a variety of reasons and they can do so without making that vital commitment to Christ which is the mark of a Christian. Part of the work of the branches is to help those are not sure about their faith to know the love of Jesus for themselves and to make that commitment to him.

Back to the vine. What Jesus says to his disciples is all about their relationship with him – and particularly their on-going relationship after he has left them to return to the Father. Being a branch of the vine means being in a permanent relationship of dependency on Jesus just as he was dependent on his Father.

Jesus encourages the disciples to remain in him, to abide in him in faith and trust. Then they will know the power of his words abiding in them. If they remain in his love and keep his commandment to love one another, these three things – abiding in faith and trust, his words abiding in them, and loving one another – will set them apart as a new kind of loving community, and will also equip them to continue his work after he has returned to the Father. They will also be equipped to face a hostile world by the coming of the Holy Spirit. All of that is relevant to us in the here and now. Not that we will have to face a hostile world – more a world that is indifferent, unable to see the relevance of what happened two thousand years ago, and too individualistic to be prepared to get involved in something which might make demands.

If the vine is not the church, what is the church all about? Jesus told us to love one another. We can't do that unless we know one another and we get to know one another by meeting together. The church exists as we meet together with Jesus in our midst. When we come together we are the church. If no one turned up and the building was empty it would still be a church building but there would be no church. The church is us, and it exists as long as we come together in Jesus' name. If we all met on the Common as happens once a year, the church would be on the Common. If a few of us met in someone's house for bible study or prayer, the church would be there. The church is wherever the people of God, Jesus' disciples meet in his name.

Another thing Jesus told us to do is to take bread and wine and in sharing them together to remember him, particularly as he shared with his disciples in the Last Supper. As we remember him he becomes present with us, as he is in the Eucharist and in any gathering where we meet in his name and invite his presence.

If the vine is not a good metaphor of the church what is? Paul uses the idea of the church as a body as we heard in our second reading. This idea still depends on an organic connection between all the members but highlights the fact that we are all different and have different gifts and therefore different tasks to do in the church. The metaphor of the vine is helpful on an individual basis as I have tried to explain, but in a sense every branch is the same and has the same task – to abide and grow, and to bear fruit. In the image of the church as the body of Christ, each person has a gift individual to them and their own task or ministry – as God has called them.

In Acts ch. 2 we read the account of what happened on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter preached the good news so powerfully that three thousand people became believers. These people Acts tells us, lived in community holding everything in common, and shared all their resources. They met together frequently for prayer and worship and to share bread and wine. Meeting together like that in large numbers meant that some people had to take on particular roles and so some became stewards and some were appointed to be deacons, while the Apostles, Peter and the others who had been with Jesus, took on the roles of teachers, prophets and evangelists.

That has always been the pattern of church life and so today some are pastors, some are administrators, some are evangelists, some are welcomers and stewards, some make tea and coffee, some lock up when everyone else has gone home. Some even become churchwardens, although they seem to be a very rare breed.

All these different tasks within the church are the gift of the Spirit. We each have different gifts, skill sets, whatever you want to call it. We each have something we can offer to the life of the church. All these gifts are given for the building up of the life of the church, and the offering of our time and talents to the service of God is part of our bearing fruit to the extent it enables us to reach outside the four walls of the church to the community and beyond.

We are the body of Christ – that is something we hear in our service – and we need to take it seriously. The body of Christ is us together, actively working in the world today, to continue the work we see Jesus doing in his ministry. Some of those things are done in different ways now – for example – most people turn to the NHS, in this country, rather than seeking a healer. We have a welfare state so the people who would have been destitute in Jesus' day can receive help and support – although there are still those who do need help through the Food Bank and charity. Jesus was very concerned for justice and so should we be. There are many ways we can express our commitment to Christ by involvement in campaigning or supporting charities.

But whatever we do, being the Body of Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to enable that to happen, otherwise we are just a gathering. Jesus commanded us to love one another and we need the Holy Spirit to help us do that.

So – two pictures of what the church might be about. The idea of the Vine helps us see the importance of our individual faith and commitment, our connection to Jesus. As we grow in faith individually and together, if we believe and trust in God's love for us, if we make that the foundation on which we live, as he lives in us through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live as his disciples. As members of the Body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we become the people God, each of us serving God as he has called us. As branches of that vine together we are here to be Christ's body in this part of Streatham, serving those in need, making Christ known, making him present and working to build the kingdom of God among us.

To him be the glory. Amen.