

## **Growing in God**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2023  
at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Acts 2:37-47, John 15:1-11

(Part of Lent sermon series as part of 2023 Year of Renewal)

### **Introduction**

What kind of a Christian are you? A good Christian? Or a bad Christian? And what makes someone a good or bad Christian? I hope that our Lent series of sermons, and the teaching in house groups, will help us all to grow stronger in our faith and more authentic in the way we live it out. Together we are looking at different aspects of being a Christian, or a disciple of Jesus.

In the first week we thought about what true worship is, and how it is an essential part of being a Christian.

Last week John White spoke about what renewal might look like in us as individuals and in our church, based on Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12. There Paul wrote about committing ourselves wholeheartedly to God's service, letting the Holy Spirit transform our minds, playing our part in the Body of Christ, and behaving towards others according to the highest Christian standards.

Today we are thinking about how we can grow in our relationship with God. Our reading from Acts was about how the first converts to the Christian faith in the Jerusalem church made sure they were growing:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>1</sup>

The enthusiasm of the new believers was such that it affected all areas of their lives, including their attitude to money and possessions:

they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder what kind of impact our church would have on our local community and the wider world if Christians showed even half of that kind of generosity?

### **Authentic Christianity**

One of the qualities that are valued in our society is authenticity. We are encouraged to be "true to ourselves". Politicians and celebrities lose credibility if they are not seen to be living by the values they claim to espouse.

As Christians we are called, not to be true to ourselves, but to be true to our profession as disciples of Jesus. Is the word "Christian" just a comfortable label that makes us feel virtuous, or are we serious about following Jesus?

The members of that early church in Jerusalem took time to listen to the apostles' teaching. There are so many more opportunities today to learn about the Christian faith and how to apply it to daily life. Pretty much everyone who comes to this church has a Bible, maybe two or more. How often, I wonder, do they get read? Do we take the time and trouble to learn, through study groups or devotional reading,

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:45 NRSV

how to apply the teachings of the Bible to our own lives and to the dilemmas of the modern world?

The passage in Acts also talks about worship, prayer and fellowship – spending time with other Christians, sharing stories and supporting each other. If we see these aspects of being a Christian becoming more evident in our lives this year, then we'll know that renewal is taking place.

## **The vine**

Last week's key image was the Church as the Body of Christ, with each member being like a different part of the body. This week we have a different image, also about a living organism, but this time it's a vine, as Jesus describes himself in John Chapter 15.

In the Old Testament the vine is used several times as a metaphor for Israel.<sup>3</sup> In every case, though, that vine was shown as failing to bear the fruit of good works and obedience to God. Now Jesus speaks of himself as “the true vine”. His followers are the branches, and as in the Old Testament passages, God the vinegrower is looking for fruit.

But there's a big difference in the way Jesus uses the image. Rather than using the image to describe the nation as a whole, he talks about each disciple as being like a branch, intimately connected to the main trunk of the vine. He is describing the relationship which each of us has with him. Just as with the image of the Body of Christ, each of us is a part of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 80:8-11, Hosea 10:1, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21

So what does the fruit represent? It probably stands for the Christian qualities that Paul was writing about [in Romans chapter 12, such as love for others, patience, perseverance, generosity, compassion and hospitality<sup>4</sup>. We could also think of the fruit of the Spirit which Paul writes about] in Galatians 5 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.<sup>5</sup>

### **The key to fruitfulness**

You may well be thinking, those are great ideals, but it's jolly hard trying to live up to those standards. And, of course, you're right. Jesus says as much in verse 4 of John chapter 15:

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

His words go to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian isn't just a person who tries to live a good life according to the teaching of Jesus. A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with Jesus as his or her Saviour and Lord. The image of the vine speaks of us being literally part of Jesus, organically connected to him. It is his life that flows through us, just as the sap in the vine flows into each of the branches and enables them to bear fruit. The life, or spirit, of Jesus is the Holy Spirit of God, and so the fruit that we will produce, which Paul calls the Fruit of the Spirit, is the behaviour and the qualities of Jesus himself. We abide, or live, in him, and he in us. If we're not

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:9ff

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

connected to Jesus then we are like dead wood, lifeless and unable to bear fruit.

But if we do remain connected to Jesus, allowing his life to flow through us, then we will bear fruit, which will bring glory to God, the vinegrower. And I would suggest that the most effective way to stay connected to Jesus, to build our relationship with him, is prayer – a regular time each day, and lots of spontaneous moments during each day when we check in with him, share our thoughts and listen to him.

This brings me back to the beginning of our passage, where Jesus says that in order to be really fruitful, branches need pruning. A skilled vinegrower will be able to identify parts that need cutting back in order that the rest of the branch will grow stronger. There may be parts of each of us that need some pruning. Are there some unhealthy attitudes that linger in our consciousness and prevent us from wholeheartedly living for Jesus, attitudes towards ourselves, others or God? Is there a habit we really ought to give up, not just for Lent, but in order to be fit to serve God? If we're too busy to pray or to get to church, what might God want us to cut out of our busy lives so that we can grow spiritually? Being pruned can be painful. Sometimes God uses the events of life to knock the corners off us, or to encourage us to turn back to him for help and guidance. But if we respond in faith and grow closer to God as a result, it's all to the good.

### **How to abide in Jesus**

There are several clues in the passage as to what we can do to make sure we “abide” in Jesus, or remain connected to

him. One is in verse 7, where Jesus talks about his words abiding in us. Earlier, in verse 3, he said that the word had spoken to his disciples had already cleansed them. Now he includes a promise:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

St Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.<sup>6</sup>

Reading the Bible is not for the purposes of filling our heads with knowledge, but so that we can hear what God is saying to us about ourselves, how we live, and our world.

What about the promise that whatever we wish will be done for us? This passage is all part of Jesus' pep talk to his disciples about how they are going to carry on his work when he is no longer with them. He wants their lives and their work to be fruitful. If our prayers come out of our submission to God and our desire to bear fruit and give him glory, why would he not want to answer them?

Another tip for how to abide in Jesus, or maintain a close relationship with him, comes in verse 10:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

In other words, do what Jesus says. Put his teaching into practice. He will certainly empower us to do so, if we are willing. He will help us to be patient with that family

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<sup>6</sup> Colossians 3:16 NRSV

member, work colleague or neighbour who annoys us. He will help us to forgive the person who treated us disrespectfully or unkindly. He will help us to overcome our self-centredness and make a really generous donation to the charity that is seeking to help the victims of an earthquake or other disaster.

### **It's all about love**

Just one last word: did you notice how Jesus talks about God's love for him and his love for each of us? In verse 9, Jesus says,

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

The relationship between Jesus and God the Father is a relationship of love. Jesus has extended that love to us. A few verses later he will say that the greatest love is to die for one's friends, which, of course, is what he was about to do. That's what we remember each week as we come to the altar to receive the bread and the wine, Jesus' body and blood. It's another powerful way of renewing our relationship with him. As Jesus says earlier in the Gospel:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.<sup>7</sup>

And it's also an encouragement to us to obey the commandment that Jesus gives his disciples in 15.12:

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

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<sup>7</sup> John 6:56

## **Real Christians**

So, in conclusion, I come back to the question I asked at the beginning: What kind of Christian are you? I think we can forget about deciding whether we're a good Christian or a bad Christian. The important thing is whether we are a *real* Christian – someone who has a personal relationship of love with Jesus. If you are, what are you doing to stay close to Jesus, or “abide” in him? Is your relationship with him one that is growing, so that his life within you will bring forth the fruit of love, kindness, generosity? Are you willing to show your love for him by putting his teaching into practice this week, so that God the Father is glorified?

## **Prayer**

Jesus, our Saviour and Lord, thank you for your amazing love which led you to give up your life for us. Show us how we can grow closer to you each day. Make your presence real to us as we pray, speak to us through the Bible and the circumstances of life, help us to worship you and to share fellowship with our brothers and sisters. May your life, your Spirit, flow through us, making us more like you each day. May we know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.