

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revd. Cara Heafey, Associate Minister, Summertown URC

READ: JOHN 15:1-8

" I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..."



Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

REFLECT:

This week's gospel passage is a fragment of Jesus' "farewell discourse", the words he spoke to his disciples to prepare them for his death and their life together beyond it.

It's a rich and beautiful parable. Jesus is the vine, the centre, the source. The disciples are the branches, dependent on Jesus, connected to one another, living and growing, hopefully, to flourish and bear fruit. God the Father is the gardener, carefully tending the vines to encourage health and fruitfulness. A process that involves training, pinching out, thinning and pruning; removing all that's dead, unproductive or rambling.

It's worth spending some time with this picture of discipleship, of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If you'll forgive the pun it's a really juicy metaphor, with much to teach us.

We live in a culture that reveres a myth of personal success and individual achievement. This can seep into our churches and our lives, distorting our own sense of identity and worth. Some weeks back I quoted Desmond Tutu, who is reported to have said in conversation with Richard Rohr, "We are only the light bulbs, Richard, and our job is to remain screwed in!" Without being plugged in to the energy source a light bulb is useless. It can't give light on its own. Nor can a branch bear fruit if it's cut off from the vine which is the source of its nutrients. In fact the closer it grows to the vine, the better the fruit, which is why pruning is such an important feature of vine-growing.

Jesus spoke often about losing life in order to find it. There is something of that in this parable I think, about losing our ego and delusions of self-determination, only to find that in doing so we discover our true identity, flourishing and fruitfulness. Verse 7 describes, not some genie-of-the-lamp type wish fulfilment, but bringing our own desires into line with God's.

CONNECT:

- Reflect on the story of your life and your faith. Where can you see evidence of God's pruning, training and tending?
- Review your life now. Are there branches that are dead or dying? Are there things that deplete your energy and do not bear fruit? Might it be time to cut them away?
- How about in the lives of our churches?
- What nourishes you spiritually? What are you doing to abide in - and draw deeply from - the source of all life and love?
- How are we sharing resources and supporting each other to grow?

MISHEARD IN CHURCH:

On a more light-hearted note, thank you to those who sent me your own examples of misheard hymns, prayers and Bible passages in response to last week's reflection. They were too good not to share:

- *My beloved spake* (from Song of Songs) - "I took to be a favourite gardening tool, presumably a cross between a spade and a rake."
- *Brightens up the sky* (from All Things Bright and Beautiful) heard as "Brighton's up the sky"
- "Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be Thy name..."
- And very appropriate for this week's theme, "Some saw the grapes in custard fall" (the correct lyric is "clusters")

