

Sermon 5th May 2024: John 15: 9-17 Hugh Skell

Prayer

Introduction: the largest grape vine

Does anyone know which is the largest grape vine in the world?

If you google this question, the answer that comes back is the Great Vine at Hampton Court Palace. This was planted over 250 years ago in 1768 while Capability Brown was in charge of the gardens at Hampton Court. It is now four metres around the base, and the longest rod is 36.5 m. Despite its advanced age it is still exceedingly fruitful. Its biggest crop was in 2001, when it produced 383kg of grapes.

Now, that is what Google will tell you, but on this occasion Google is incorrect. In the first part of John 15, which we read last week, Jesus says, "I am the True Vine" and goes on to say that his disciples are the branches. There are now over 2.4 billion followers of Jesus, spread across every country in the globe. That is some grape vine!

Throughout the Bible God declares that he is a God of love, faithfulness and justice. He is looking for fruit that will show the whole world what he is like: his character, and the things he values.

God is still looking for the same harvest, a people who will show his loving kindness towards others. People who will work for justice and healing and the lifting up of the downtrodden and the release of those held captive by darkness.

We, as the disciples of Jesus, are called to produce fruit that will glorify God. But we need to remember that **Jesus is the Vine**. We are merely the branches, conduits through which his love will flow. We don't produce the fruit – Jesus does. Our job is to remain joined to him, so that his goodness will run through us like sap through the the vine, and produce fruit to bring glory to the Father.

There is so much in this passage, but I have four key points that I think are keys.

1. What does it mean to remain or abide in Jesus?
2. Jesus has chosen us
3. Servants and friends
4. What is the fruit that God is looking for?

1. Abide or Remain

Firstly what does Jesus mean when he says, "Abide in me"?

I used to think that this was some kind of mystical state, that required great holiness, discipline and concentration to enter. But the Greek word just means "remain" or "continue". It comes 11 times in the first 17 verses of John 15, so it is clearly very important.

Jesus talks about remaining in his love, just as he remains in the Father's love. It is a bit like nested Russian dolls, with each doll resting inside a bigger doll. Like a small child resting in

their mother's arms, so we little disciples rest in the love of Jesus, and he rests in the love of the Great Father. We don't need to do anything to remain in Jesus' love, the danger comes when we step away from it and try to go it alone.

2. Chosen

Our first reading from Isaiah was all about Israel being God's chosen servant. [When I told Sue which passage I wanted her to read, she emailed me back to ask whether the Palestinians deserve God's love and protection as well as the Israelites. Of course they do.] In the Bible people are not chosen by God because they are special or worthy or have done something good. He chooses ordinary, everyday people, with flaws and weaknesses. God never says why he chooses particular people. But his plan is **always to bless others** through those he chooses.

In John 15 Jesus says, "you did not choose me, but I chose you, to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last". In the ancient world, teachers didn't choose their pupils. People sought out teachers whom they wished to follow, to study under them. But Jesus was unusual. He **chose** his disciples and called them to follow him. And he still chooses and calls today.

The great thing about being chosen by someone for a job, is that it's all their responsibility, not yours. When Jesus chooses us, he knows everything about us, and he doesn't make mistakes. We may think ourselves inadequate or useless, but he sees us as exactly right for the job in hand.

3. Servants and friends

Jesus says this interesting thing in verse 15. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made know to you."

There's a great difference between a servant and a friend. A servant is *told* to do something, and does it out of duty or in order to be paid. A friend is *asked* to do something, and does it out of friendship or love. A servant doesn't need to know why they have to do something. You're likely to share plans and dreams with a friend.

4. Fruit

So what is the fruit that Jesus is looking for?

In today's reading, the word love comes nine times. Jesus is looking for a very specific fruit: LOVE. We know from 1 Corinthians 13 that love is the fruit that truly endures.

Remember the Russian dolls? Love originates with the Father, who lavishes that love on His Son. The Son, in turn, loves his disciples in the same way, giving the ultimate demonstration of love on the cross, where he laid down his life for his friends.

Jesus wants that love to flow onwards and outwards. He says, "This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you."

It's not a *feeling* kind of love, but a *doing* love. It results in actions – feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless. We don't gain anything from helping these people. We may not even like them. The thrust of Christian love is giving, not getting. It leads us to put the needs of others before our own needs. To act with kindness, mercy, gentleness, compassion. It is a self-sacrificing love – “greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down their life for their friends”.

Jesus gives us no choice. If we want to remain in his love, we need to put love front and centre in our lives, in our churches and in our wider community.

But the great thing is that as we do this, as we seek to live lives of love, so we will remain united to the True Vine and more and more of that love will pour through us, producing more and more fruit.

Sum up

In John 15 Jesus says that we are

- **Beloved** - *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.* We need to remain soaking in that love.
- **Chosen** - *You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit that will last.* God knew what he was doing when he chose you.
- **Elevated** from servants to friends - *I no longer call you servants ... Instead I have called you friends*

Our part? Jesus invites us to:

- *Remain in my love* – stay united to Jesus the True Vine. How do we do this?
- Quite simply, Jesus says, *Obey my commands - Love each other as I have loved you*

As we do this, we will bear much fruit. The fruit of love which will bring glory to God.

Amen