

James Collins Sermon - Sunday 5 July 2020
Famous Last Words [4] Faithful and Fruitful (John 15:1-17)

Hello everyone, and many thanks to Rose for reading the first seventeen verses of John 15 to us. I really love this passage of Scripture, and guess it may be one of your favourites too. It opens up this beautiful organic picture of a faithful and fruitful Christian life.

Different religious systems have different foundational ideas. Some seem to be based largely upon adherence to a set of doctrines or obedience to a set of moral standards. Perhaps at the other extreme, others emphasise mysticism and religious experience. You can find impoverished forms of Christianity that descend into one or the other of these extremes. In contrast, and indeed throughout the scriptures, we see a picture of warm relationship with God, that enables and is deepened by a disciplined life of prayer and obedience. This is the best of both worlds - faithfulness to God, that leads to a fruitful life.

The passage that we're looking at neatly divides into two sections. The first eight verses contain the well known picture of the vine which is Christ, a gardener who is God the Father, and branches - that's those first disciples and every other disciple of Jesus Christ who's ever lived, including you and me. From verse nine, Jesus adds some teaching that fleshes out this picture.

The first thing that draws your attention as you read this passage is in the very first verse, and that is that Jesus claims to be the true vine. By implication Jesus acknowledges there are other ways of life, but he doesn't say that he is **a** vine, or even **the** vine, he says he is the **true** vine. Other religions, other ways of life might seem very appealing, but they are not the true vine and they cannot ultimately produce a fruitful life. Since God is the creator and sustainer of all life, including you and me, and since Jesus is the one who reveals God and leads us to him, it is only through Christ that we can get connected to God and live the kind of life he meant us to. All other ways of life will ultimately prove fruitless.

Perhaps you have had times in your life when you've been very tempted to walk away from Christianity, perhaps you feel that way now. Perhaps you feel disappointed in God, in the church, perhaps you feel Christianity has not 'delivered' for you. Well, friend, make no mistake. Jesus is the true vine and there is no other path to fruitfulness.

Jesus' basic point here is that we must 'remain' in him, in exactly the same way as a branch needs to stay connected to the vine if it wishes to live and bear fruit. Jesus is the source of life and growth. Unless we remain organically connected to him, we will be lifeless shadows.

One of the places we often go to as a family on holiday, is Sidmouth in Devon. It's a beautiful seaside town. One of Naomi's relatives owns a cottage there which they kindly let us use. Naomi and I love it there, but in recent years the kids are a lot less keen, for one simple reason. No Wi-Fi! As soon as they get into the cottage, suddenly their phones, normally their gateway to sustaining a meaningful life, become little more than glorified phones. A smartphone that's disconnected from the internet is not so smart. In fact, it loses most of its functionality.

Jesus, we might say in contemporary terms, is spiritual Wi-Fi. Once we are connected to him, we function as we should. All our potential is realised. But once we're in spiritual Sidmouth, or rather in the cottage in Sidmouth, then I'm afraid, so much of what we are created for, gets lost.

How do we ensure that we stay connected to Jesus? How do we 'remain' in him? Well, Jesus does not give a simple answer to that question, although there are a number of hints scattered throughout these verses. In verse seven he refers to his words remaining in us. This theme gets picked up several times from verse ten, where he equates remaining in him with being obedient to his commands, and particularly the command to love one another.

Also in verse ten he speaks of remaining in his love. In verse eleven he speaks of joy. There are also several references to effectual prayer - for example in verse seven he says, that when we remain in him, we can 'ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you'.

It isn't clear which of these different hints are things we do to remain in Jesus and which are the outcomes of us remaining in Jesus. But perhaps that's the point. This is where Jesus' picture of a branch connected to vine is better than mine of a smart phone connected to the internet. Relationships ultimately are not like machines - they don't follow a simple protocol of cause and effect. They are more organic. Jesus seems to be saying do the right things and all sorts of good things follow. Jesus is encouraging us into a virtuous spiritual circle. If we pray, if we study his words, if we are obedient to his commands, if we commit ourselves to his Kingdom and be a loving member of his community - the church. When we do these things we open ourselves to Christ - spiritual nutrients start making their way into our lives and we start bearing fruit.

Before we think a bit more deeply about the kind of fruit that Jesus wants us to bear, we need to look at a more difficult issue that comes up in verses two and three. Jesus tells us that his Father cuts off every branch that does not bear fruit and there's no escape even for fruitful branches - they get pruned so that they will bear more fruit.

There's no escaping the discomfort that lies behind Jesus' words here. Jesus pictures some branches as fruitless and therefore worthless. They are cut off and burned. The image of fruitless plants or trees is often used in scripture to describe people or even nations that promise spiritual life but don't deliver. Here Jesus seems to be referring to people who appear to follow him but there's nothing lasting to show for it. Perhaps Jesus had Judas in mind. In any case, he immediately reassures these disciples that they are 'clean', because of the word he has spoken to them, and presumably their response to him. Nevertheless, even fruitful Christians get pruned in order that they become even more fruitful.

I sometimes think it's just when we think we've got our Christian life sorted out, that God appears with a pair of secateurs. I remember a pivotal event in my own life along these lines. I greatly enjoyed my time at Bible College where I studied Christian theology and trained to be a pastor. I liked the study and generally did quite well until I hit one particular subject which I found very difficult. I didn't get on with the lecturer very well and ended up getting a mark in an exam which was well below what I considered acceptable. Worse still I found that I had scored worse than someone in the group that I certainly thought I should have been doing better than. No big deal right? Well, actually it was a very big deal to me at the time. You see I was proud, proud of my achievement for God as I saw it, and all of this came as a very severe blow to my pride. I can look back now and laugh about it but at the time I needed to do some soul searching as to why I reacted so badly. Ironically, the blow to my pride was fantastic preparation for ministry - so much better than most of the study!

None of us like to go through difficult times. But what Jesus is teaching here is that the Lord will allow us to go through testing circumstances, setbacks, disappointments, failures because pruning us in this way makes us more fruitful. We sometimes think that we'll be fruitful when we're achieving, when we're maximising our potential, and we can carry this attitude even into church, and try to impose our gifts on the church and it can appear as though we're doing really well. But God knows the kind of fruit he wants, and he tells us actually unless we are connected to him, there is nothing of spiritual value that we can do. His work is carried out through humble people who have learnt to trust Jesus, not arrogant people confident of their own ability. So the Lord will allow life to humble us, and that can feel painful. And although this is a challenging truth, there is comfort in it. The Lord can take any trial and use it to make you and me more fruitful for him. Brothers and sisters - are you going through difficult times? Do not despair - the Lord can use these things to make you more fruitful for him.

Let's finish on a more upbeat note. In verse sixteen Jesus reassures his disciples that he chose them (and by extension us too) to bear much fruit - fruit that will last. I'd like to read you a section from Stephen Gaukroger's book - The Crucified King. His comments on this verse about lasting fruit are really helpful. He says, "We need to take the long-term view of things as God does. The way we live our Christian lives today can have repercussions for generations after our own time. For example, through our witness a neighbour

may become a Christian. As a result of that, his or her spouse gets converted and then together they teach their children about Jesus. Eventually, those children become committed Christians and they go on to find Christian marriage partners and then they too have children and teach them about the Lord. And so it can go on for generation after generation. As a result of one person being saved, an entire family gets converted. Their Christian witness spills over into other families, and so entire communities are touched by the power of God. We don't know when Jesus is going to return, but when he does, the work we have done for his kingdom in our own lifetimes will still be bearing fruit then, no matter how many generations later it may be. We may have died long ago, but we will have built something of lasting, eternal value."

So our lives have incredible meaning and purpose. Every day we have the opportunity to bear fruit. A simple act of kindness, passionate prayer, encouragement for a fellow believer or a church leader, building up the church family, witnessing to a neighbour, a simple act of generosity offered in Jesus' name - all of these have enormous power - by God's grace, these simple acts of obedience in the name of Jesus can bear fruit not just beyond our lifetimes, but forever.

In some darker moments recently I've wondered, in truth I've worried about the state of the UK church at the other end of lockdown. Will thousands have got so used to a Sunday lie-in that they will never re-establish the habit of meeting with fellow Christians for worship? Will everyone turn up in their pyjamas? That would be less of a problem.

Brothers and sisters - Jesus is the true vine. There is no other way of life that will lead to fruit which will last. If we remain in him we're not in for an easy ride. His Father is committed to us living fruitful lives for the Kingdom of God. Even when we are bearing fruit he will still put us through tough training so that we can bear even more. But what could be better than knowing that your life has purpose. That you are serving the Eternal God and that your life is bearing fruit for him. Eternal fruit.

Stay faithful brothers and sisters and the Lord will make your life fruitful!