

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

There is so much to say to the imagery our Lord Jesus sets before us with what we hear today, Himself being the Vine, the Father being the Vinedresser, His Christians being the branches. In some ways it is a rather *challenging* imagery; there are many elements to it that do not quite correspond to the categories we would usually think of as common sense. To some extent, this is to do with what we hear our Lord Jesus teaching today not originally having been spoken to westerners such as ourselves; and to some extent it is to do with what we hear our Lord Jesus teaching today being the realities of God, which are altogether beyond our comprehension to begin with. After all, our linear logic, our categories for what can and cannot be right, they really are all relative; they represent neither the whole truth nor the only truth about everything, or even about anything. Only the Wisdom of God is absolute, ultimately, and objective, and universal, so as to apply to all things, in all things, and to all men.

Well, at least one challenge in the imagery our Lord Jesus presents to us today most likely arise out of a rather common misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Truth of God. I suspect that many Christians, as they hear our Lord Jesus speaking of how some branches bear fruit and others not, assume that what this means is that only *some* Christians do enough good works, and those who do not will be cast out into the eternal fire; for this way of thinking is deeply engrained in the minds of many. Some are assured of their own goodness and godliness and enjoy making those anxious whom they deem not to be quite as good Christians as they think they are themselves, by holding the threat before them that they might be found, on the day of judgement, to have fallen short of the salvation of God. Others are too serious about the things of God to take their own sins and shortcomings so lightly, and they suffer already, as the self-righteous enjoy having them do, from the fear of not being good enough, and not doing enough good, and not doing good well enough.

As engrained as this way of thinking is in the minds of many Christians, however, it is completely contradictory to the Word of God, and to the very innermost nature of the Christian faith; as we hear it today that our Lord Jesus says it to those who first heard Him saying what we hear Him saying today: *Already you are clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.*

There it is. His Word makes those clean, who hear it and take it to heart, the Word of Himself and His salvation, how the Son of God, who shall come in glory to judge both the living and the dead, has Himself borne all judgement for sinners, having been born into our kind and baptised into our sin to bear it for us before the judgement of God, having Himself cursed and condemned for it and with it, in our stead and on our behalf, crucified to pay the price and penalty and make us right with Himself and righteous before His judgement, free from all guilt and impurity. With His Word of the price He has paid to make us free from guilt before His judgement, the heavenly Judge declares us to be that, and so we are that, for what He says cannot but be what goes because He is the Judge, and because He Himself has paid the price, in full and in abundance.

When He speaks of *bearing fruit*, as we hear it today that He does, it is our *salvation* our Saviour has in mind. As we also hear it today that He says it: *He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, and: By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* To bear fruit is to remain in Him and actually be saved, to the glory of God the Father. It is not so, as quite a few Christians outside of our communion believe, that being called to the faith by His Word of salvation is but the beginning of your salvation, that once you have come to the faith He is done saving you, and it is up to you to be good enough and do enough good and do good well enough so as to save yourself and not be among the damned on the day of judgement. Rather, as we hear it today that He says it, what it takes for us to remain in His good graces is to remain in the Word of salvation by which His salvation is given to us, for to remain in His Word of salvation is to remain in *Him* who is Himself the eternal Word of God, and is Himself our salvation: *Already you are clean because of the Word I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you.*

If we move on ahead away from His Word of salvation to earn a righteousness of our own by our own goodness and godliness, we have already fallen from the faith, and we are in danger of losing sight of our Saviour altogether, and be lost to His salvation.

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, as we hear it that He says it, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. As life flows to the branches from the vine, so our life, as His Christians, flow from Christ Himself.

Only when we live in His living Word will His life be in us and preserve us for His eternal life. Without Him we can do nothing. Our faith, in so far as it is *true* faith, is not our own doing, our own choice or decision, rather, it is His love alive in us, breathed into us with His Holy Spirit, in His Word of salvation. If we separate ourselves from His Word of salvation, with which He breathes His love into us, and His life, His Holy Spirit will no longer be in us, nor will His love or His life; faith in us will die, and we ourselves will die to the faith and be lost to Him and His salvation. *If anyone does not abide in me, as we hear it that He says it, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burnt.* He has also had His holy Apostle Paul write it, *the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from Heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire to inflict vengeance upon those who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; and they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might, when He comes, on that day, to be glorified in His saints and to be marvelled at among all who believed.*

And when we live in His Word, so that His love lives in us, we will want for His will to be done; we will want from Him what we know that He wills to give, that is: what His Word promises, His love and His eternal life. As we also hear it that He says it: *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.* Now, this does not mean that the mere mention of His name will attach a warranty to whatever whims and wishes we may have, so that He will have to fulfil all our selfish and sinful desires, as Satan has some of his servants teach so as to draw Christians away from Christ and make them to seek worldly wealth and health and happiness rather than His salvation, nor is our Lord Jesus commissioning Christians to issue commands to Him instead of entrusting ourselves to His goodness in faith and prayer. *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and what we will desire, then, will be His salvation, as His Word sets it before us in all its glory.*

Another challenging element in the imagery our Lord Jesus presents to us today is that of the *Father* as the vinedresser, who prunes the fruitful branches to make them to bear more fruit, and even more so of Him as the one casting out the unfruitful branches and casting them into the fire.

How does this rhyme with what our Lord Jesus has also had His holy Apostle John relate that He has said, that *the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father?*

Again, we should remember that our Lord Jesus is not seeking to satisfy our modern western sensibilities as to what makes sense and what does not. What we should take away from having the Father acting as the Vinedresser in the imagery our Lord Jesus presents to us is that it is the Father's wish that it not be in vain, what the Son has suffered for us; not only because of His love for us, but also because of His love for the Son, for what the Father seeks, in all things, is glory for the Son. Well, those are really one and the same thing, His love for us sinners and His love for the Son, just as the Father's love and the Son's are one love, as the Father and the Son are one. And since the Father and the Son are one, it is but futile to speculate as to why it is, in the imagery presented to us today, that the Father, rather than the Son or the Spirit, is portrayed as the one who prunes the fruitful branches and casts out the unfruitful ones. The point is that the Father wills our salvation, and works our salvation, together with the Son and the Spirit.

When it comes to why our Lord Jesus presents Himself as a vine rather than as another kind of tree, though, there are two rather obvious reasons.

For one thing, those who first had the Gospel according to Saint John read to them would immediately think of how our Lord Jesus gives His own life blood to His Christians with the fruit of the vine in His festive meal of salvation, and in this manner His life is in His Christians as the life of a vine is in its branches.

And then there is the very nature of the vine itself. Vine is not like a tree with a trunk, and branches sticking out as attachments, rather, a vine *consists* of its branches, and the branches *are* the vine; similar to how the holy Apostle Paul writes it, that the Church is *the body of Christ, and His fullness who fills all in all*. As the Church of Christ, and His Christians, we are not only *united* with Him, we actually *are* Him in this world. It is in His Church those who seek His salvation will find Him, in the Word and worship of His salvation, in which He Himself lives and gives Himself to those who hear His Word, and take it to heart, with all that He is and all that is His; as He gives Himself to us, with all that He is, and all that is His, for our salvation, and withholds nothing from us.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. *Amen*.