

Wednesday 23rd April, 2008

I AM THE TRUE VINE

John 15.1-8

We might apply a sub-heading to this passage of “The Supper Table”, concerning as it does the parable of the vine, the vineyard and the vinedresser; and the expounding of the meaning of union with Christ in his death – a central thought to the Christian eucharist.

St John recalls the words in the synoptic gospels ascribed to Jesus to explain the significance of the cup: “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine.” By the shedding of his blood he makes possible the existence of the *true* people of God.

At the last supper Christ did humble service to the disciples as a symbol of the even humbler service he was about to render. Judas had been identified and for the first time the embryo church was free of alien elements. He spoke to them of his departure and his return – his forthcoming death was not just a departure; he was not going away, but going to the Father. His going was the penultimate step of his divine purpose to come and make a permanent abode with men, and to bring them the gift of eternal life. The eleven men who now remained found this a hard doctrine to take in, and not least that the manifestation of the Father should be made just to the church and not to the world. They were justifiably bewildered that what they were really being asked to do was to trust God and his will.

Now the last supper is over and the disciples stand on the brink of a new life. How were they feeling and what were they thinking about? What was going to happen tomorrow, and the next day, and every single day for the rest of their lives? Together with the bread and wine they have just had the indescribable privilege of being received into a divine fellowship – whilst still in an unworthy state. They have witnessed an act of grace, quite unearned and undeserved on their part. Everybody will leave that room in nothing approaching any state of complete perfection. The outward calmness of the last supper and its wonderful giving of gifts prefigure the great acts of self-giving which are to come for each and every person there. God willing, in three days’ time they will see that death is impotent and has been surpassed, and that the real omnipotence lies in something else.

We share in our Lord's sacrificial death and receive a pledge of reunion with him by the sacraments of a loaf and the fruit of the vine, and here in chapter 15 St John stresses the latter element. Other passages in the synoptic gospels contain symbolic language based on vines and vineyards, and all of those parables recall the Old Testament description of Israel as a vine. Isaiah chapter 5, 1-7, describes the lament of the vineyard, which, in spite of all the love and care bestowed upon it by its owner, the Lord of hosts, has proved unfruitful. We are told clearly that the reference is to Israel, and can compare this picture of the chosen nation as a vine planted by Yahweh with parallel passages in Jeremiah 2.21 ("Yet I planted you as a choice vine from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?"), Hosea 10.1 ("Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built."), and elsewhere.

In all these passages where Israel is represented, the vine has become a degenerate plant which has brought sufferings upon itself. In Psalm 80, however, where the history of Israel is set forth under the figure of a vine, the poet attributes the sad plight of the nation not to its own failure but to injuries and despoilings inflicted upon it by others, and he appeals to Yahweh, the owner and husbandman, to visit and revive the vine of his own planting, that is, Israel - Israel, the fruitless vine.

In the metaphor of the vine, we hear no more of Israel as the vine of God's tending. The story opens boldly, not in the form of a parable, but with the vivid and direct words "I am". An exalted self-affirmation, dramatically at odds with the familiar Old Testament figure of the vine referring to the nation as a whole. Jesus now describes himself in terms formerly used of a community. The life of God-with-man has now begun. The Lord in whom we have already learned to see the true or real "Son of man", now, in the last of His seven self-declarations declares Himself to be the true or real vine, tended by his Father. The true vine is to be found not in Israel but in the Messiah, the son of God. Like all vines, it will have branches, and like all vines, it will need attention. It will need dressing and pruning, and useless branches will have to be cut away and destroyed. But it will continue to bear fruit. We pass at once to the thought of the vine's relationship to the branches which belong to it and form the care and duty of the husbandman, that is, to the thought of the Lord's relationship to his disciples, under the guiding care of the Father. Just as a hand is not a hand unless joined to an arm of a living body, and cannot do the work of a hand unless joined in that way, so a vine branch is not a branch unless it is joined to the vinestock, and it cannot bear grapes unless it is so joined.

The father, as the vinedresser, stands over the whole process, directing its outcome. Christ, the vine, is the means by which men are related to God.

The comparison may be drawn with Judaism which had come to hoard the spiritual treasures of her revealed religion, just like robbers hoard the spoils of their raids. The true vine would bear fruit; that is to say, the Church had to evangelise so that the world would come to know that the Son loved the Father and the Father loved the world.

The repeated use of the word dwelling or abiding denotes this personal relationship as one of mutual indwelling within the disciples as a body of men. We are true members of the people of God, not by virtue of physical descent, but by abiding in him. Since true discipleship is bound to show itself in fruit-bearing, any unfruitful branch is removed (and so perhaps we might see clear references here in verses 2 and 6 to Judas, as examples of discipleship without faith), whilst fruitful branches are pruned to increase their fruit-bearing potential. We might also see the unfruitful branches as the unbelieving Israelites who are to be cut away from God's plant. In chapter 6 the Lord revealed himself as the bread which sustains life, but now, by comparing himself to a vine and his disciples to its tendrils, He makes himself known not only as the sustainer but also as the origin and source of true or real life – but a life to be had only by the disciples in union with him. If they abide in him, then they may ask whatever they will, and it will be done. There is no prospect of fruitful life otherwise, but rather being cut away from Christ and subsequently destroyed. Fruitful life is communion with God in which prayer is always answered. Man owes his being to God, and now we learn that this dependence is to come about, and what is to be the true and final relationship of men to their Creator.

But what does a disciple ask for himself and his work when he has the word of the Lord abiding in him? Not for a straight and easy run of evangelistic success as a replacement for the difficulties he finds as he confronts the world. That would deny the necessity of the Lord's departure and be tantamount to refusing to believe that his suffering and death are an essential part of his final triumph. So, to bear fruit is not simply to have evangelistic success; it is to be with the Lord in witness, both in word and in deed, in action and in passion, in suffering and in joy, in defeat and in victory, in death and resurrection. It is this manner of bearing fruit which glorifies the Father.

To remain loyal to the words of Jesus in this way is also the one means of attaining heavenly joy. The whole reason for Jesus speaking to them as he has done is so that the disciples may attain that heavenly joy, and spend themselves so that others might attain it too. And since he has spoken to them of what he is about to do for them, it is the sole reason for his dying for them.

In chapter 14 the disciples were told that the Lord would grant their prayers made in his name in order that the Father might be glorified in the Son. But now, in the final verse, He Himself stands aside and there is a sudden move from symbolism to direct speech. If the disciples bear much fruit they will live the life of true discipleship and glorify Him directly, even if the Lord's work for them and their relationship to Him are not forgotten. Now for the first time the truth is set before them that, firstly, the measure of the Father's love for the Son is the measure of their Lord's love for them, and, secondly, that our Lord's obedience to his father's commandments must be the measure of their obedience to their master's commandments. In revealing this truth to them they may share in his joy which is capable of unending increase.

Amen.

