

Today's readings struck me as a study in opposites, with the Gospel reading rather dark, and the Acts reading more uplifting. Jesus begins today's Gospel passage by saying, "I am the true vine". This is last of Jesus' seven so-called "I am" sayings in John's Gospel. Last week we heard, "I am the good shepherd." The others are "I am the Light of the world", "I am the Bread of Life", "I am the gate for the sheep", "I am the Resurrection and the Life", and "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life". Notice how often 'Life' appears, the eternal life that Jesus spoke of. Biblical scholars interpret that John used these metaphors to emphasize the divinity of Jesus, because they seem to reflect the story of Moses at the burning bush, where Moses asked God, "Who are you?" God replied, "I am" or, "I am who I am."

John's Gospel is full of symbolism, and that is true of today's reading. The Gospels repeatedly record Jesus telling stories about vines and vineyards. This is not just because Jesus lived in an agrarian society, but because the vine and vineyard are a specific metaphor for the land and people of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. God is the keeper of the vineyard (Israel). There are several references to this in the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea. Sometimes the vineyard has been unproductive and gone wild. The prophets interpret these times of Israel's unfaithfulness to God as reasons for God's punishment, such as the captivity of the Israelite leaders in Babylon. In our Lenten study we saw that Jesus used a similar metaphor in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. There, the vineyard continued to be Israel, and the wicked or unfaithful tenants were the Temple leadership.

However, an important change in emphasis has taken place between the Hebrew Scriptures and John's Gospel. Instead of the vine representing Israel, it now stands for Jesus – or perhaps more accurately, the eternal Christ figure. For John, Christ is the 'true' vine, not the land or people of Israel. The Jewish leadership did not "abide" in Jesus. He considered them to be like a branch of the vine that had withered. A similar change in identity is found in the Jewish Apocalyptic book of 2 Baruch, where the Messiah is likened to a fountain and a vine. 2-Baruch was written around the same time as John's Gospel, so the idea of linking Messiahship to a vine is not unique to John.

When I tried to apply this Gospel passage to us today, I was comfortable with the idea that a branch of a vine cannot survive and produce good fruit by itself. We can use this as an analogy for our need to be sustained by faith in Jesus. This includes, I think, continuing to come to church to be sustained not just in Jesus but in the fellowship of the community. Some people, I'm sure, can keep their faith alive in isolation ("Jesus and me"). Perhaps such people are very introspective, but I am not one of them. I find that the support of other people – including those I go to church with – is important to help me keep my spiritual batteries charged.

I found it very difficult to accept some of the other ideas in the passage. It's not just the Jewish leadership of John's day who are at risk of being removed from the vine. It is "whoever" does not abide in Jesus and bear [enough spiritual] fruit. It doesn't seem to leave much room for repentance (turning oneself around) and forgiveness. In my theology, God gives us many 'second chances'. As for being thrown away and burned in the fire, this is too close to the idea of eternal damnation in hell, which is hard to square with a loving Father (Parent)-Creator God.

Finally, we come to that most difficult idea of all – that if we abide in Jesus Christ, whatever we ask for will be done for us. That promise is not “will be done for us as God sees best for us” which is how we pray on Sundays for God to help those for whom our prayers are asked. Instead, it is the more straightforward, “God will give you whatever you ask for.” But this is plainly untrue. I found the reading from Acts to be a delightful contrast to what I have just talked about. Philip and an Ethiopian official are travelling together. It may or may not be relevant that the Ethiopian is a eunuch, since according to Leviticus 20, he was considered “blemished” and therefore not eligible to approach the Lord’s sanctuary. They get into a discussion about Scripture and Jesus. The Ethiopian is so taken with what he hears that he wants to be baptized there and then. They are passing by some kind of pond or stream, so the Ethiopian says, “Look, there’s some water. Why not baptize me there?” And that’s what Philip did. He welcomed this “blemished person” into full fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Notice the informality of it. As a Jew, Philip would have been familiar with the traditional ritual bath for conversion to Judaism. That was (and is) an elaborate process that involved “living” (that is, moving) water and full immersion with no clothes on. Philip was one of the Twelve, but we’re not told that he had been given specific training for baptism, or whether the other disciples in Jerusalem had made him sign a position description for baptising. There was no long baptismal preparation course, no font, no godparents. I think our diocese would have found it all a bit loosey-goosey. We don’t even know what Philip said – but it probably wasn’t, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. We only know that Philip baptized him.

I suspect that this kind of informality and spontaneity were important in attracting the early converts to what later became called Christianity, compared with the rigidity of Judaism at that time. Likewise, our Anglican rituals and traditions are all very well, so long as we don’t let them become the be-all and end-all. Today’s story tells that what was important was that the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized, and Philip was on hand to baptize him. The ‘Church Father’ Tertullian, who died about 200 years after Jesus, wrote that Easter and Pentecost are especially suitable days for baptism, but beyond that, he commented, “any day will serve, for solemnity adds nothing to grace.”

I really like that phrase, “solemnity adds nothing to grace.” My hope for our Sunday morning worship that you find it generally joyful, sometimes spontaneous, and that you enjoy coming to church. I am strongly minded of the theology that we should not come to church each week to be beaten up because we are sinful. Yes, we make mistakes, yes, we screw up, but we are assured that the slate can be wiped clean, thanks to God’s grace, provided that we repent and promise to try to do better. The passage from John seems to look back to an older era, with its idea of being cut out of the divine company if we mess up, and get thrown away (what a horrible thought – thrown away – just like garbage) if we are spiritually unfruitful. We are not garbage; we are part of God’s Creation.

That’s why I want to commend Philip to you. I don’t know whether there were any rules about baptism back then. Maybe there were, and he ignored them. Maybe there weren’t and he made it up as he went along. Either way, what a refreshing thought. We make the same mistake as the Pharisees with whom Jesus argued so often if we treat the Bible simply as a rule book for how to avoid bad living – “Don’t do this; don’t do that.” Philip knew how to treat that Ethiopian neighbour as himself, by showing kindness towards him. Let us hope that if we do likewise we will be found, as Scripture has it, “not far from the Kingdom of God.”