

## **“I am the vine; you are the branches”**

### **Reading: John 15:1-8**

I remember rose pruning time when I was a child in Africa. My Grandmother would come round with her hat and stool to help my mother as we had quite a few roses, and they would work their way round, sawing off whole dead branches, cutting, chopping off long, straggly briars coming up from the roots, painting the cuts to keep borer beetles out, and looking at the eyes to see where best to prune to keep the shape of the rose plant and to promote growth. It was all to produce flowers. There's nothing attractive about a rose bush except the flowers; in fact, I remember someone saying roses should be grown with the vegetables because the plants were so unattractive. Those scenes of my grandmother and mother in the roses seem a world away - and they are!

It's pruning roses that, helps me to understand what Jesus is getting at in this passage as He speaks to his disciples. It is the night before He is to die, so there's an urgency and a directness here. The entire purpose of the vine is not to be decorative but to bear fruit, the maximum yield, not just a few bunches. And it won't bear much fruit if it's left to sprout where it wants, and to spread and spread. It sounds nice and gentle to leave it to grow as it wants, but it's nonsense in farming terms. Every branch needs trimming back, Jesus says, and dead bits need chopping out completely. Huge mats of lanky growth are got rid of at a few strokes.

Jesus is talking to his disciples here, ie to Christians today, and the encouragements and the challenges are for his followers, and therefore for us, rather than for people in general. What about the challenges? The main challenge is obviously for us to be fruitful Christians. Unlike growing roses in our gardens for pretty flowers, a pleasant hobby when we feel like it, God doesn't see the world as a hobby or toy. He's completely dedicated to the world, He's poring over it, and He's desperate to see fruit. Seven times in the eight verses He talks about the fruit. And his entire plan is to do it through his followers, you and me, the branches. Our job then is not self-fulfilment, not to have a private faith away from others; our job is to have an effect in the world, to produce fruit. On a vine the

branches produce fruit which is not for themselves but for others: the task God gives us is to produce fruit for Him and for others.

And to do that, all the branches need pruning. So we all will need that, and it's painful. Pruning means God taking away some of the things you have been doing, perhaps taking them away through age or illness, closing off some family links or friendships, or stopping some plans you may have had. Pruning sometimes comes through God telling us off about some attitude or something we do, and telling us to change. This pruning is not God wanting to spoil our fun or damage our life; it's about new growth in a different direction; it's for our good and to make us more fruitful, but in new ways.

I said that this passage is for Christians, and there's another challenge for Christians in it: Jesus says, "No branch can bear fruit by itself," and, "Apart from me you can do nothing." In other words, "Whatever you do, involve God. Work out whether it's right or wrong, and ask Him to bless and guide you." Don't think, "God can't do things properly in this world, and I can do charity work or whatever it is better than Him." Also, don't think that your work or your family or your household needs aren't God's concern. Avoid having areas of your life (habits, attitudes, thoughts) that you'd prefer God to keep out of. Don't think, "God helps those who help themselves, so I'll just get on with living, and God jolly well better bless it." "Apart from me you can do nothing." But, on the other hand, we are told in "Philippians", "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13).

### **And the encouragements?**

1/ You can be part of God's plan, a branch - perhaps a twig! - but trusted by Him, part of his plan.

2/ You will need some pruning, but Jesus says you are clean; you aren't a diseased branch. If you have said yes to following Him, then you are a strong, growing branch, even if you don't feel like it, and He's helping you to grow and become even more fruitful for Him. So don't run yourself down. You are a clean, growing branch.

3/ Jesus wants you to remain/abide in Him (He says so nine times), but He also says twice that He will remain in us. What a thought! It's not a case of us hanging on to Him by the skin of our teeth and of us

having to do all the running. Jesus is living and working in you! The sap in the vine is running - rushing - up from the roots, and into you, giving you energy and producing fruit, and the sap is God at work in you. So Jesus says, "Don't stop the sap; let it flow. Let Him be at work and then just see what He does!"

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