

## Bennochy church 6<sup>th</sup> May 2012

Jesus was the master of the image. He took the everyday and ordinary and turned them into powerful images of God that would stick in people's mind. But because we have seen the image and heard the story before, we lose their initial impact. Jesus didn't need to make a DVD or write a book or even use social networking sites or twitter, but maybe he would have! All he had to do was be the creative storyteller. *"I am the vine, and my father is the gardener"*. You see, everyone would have been familiar with the vine, its fruit and how to make it healthy and grow. He says to those original listeners, you who walk past the vine without giving it a second thought, now look at it using different eyes.

This was a different culture; a society based on agriculture. People grew things. So, it is not surprising that in the urban world of 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland, this image does not capture the imagination, as once it would have. We are not producers; we are consumers, my apologies to those who have some vines in a green house.

It was also a culture with a theological history. In the Old Testament, Israel was seen as a vine brought out of Egypt by God and planted in the Promised Land, you can see that description in Psalm 80. But Israel, the vineyard of God (Isaiah 5:7) failed to yield the expected fruit. They disobeyed God and never became the 'Light to the nations'. The prophets

constantly called on the people to bear fruit for God; love mercy, seek justice, walk humbly with God, but so often they simply turned away.

However in Hosea 14 there are echoes of hope and again the image of the vine is used. *Once again they will live under my protection. They will grow crops of grain and be fruitful like a vineyard. They will be as famous as the wine of Lebanon (7)*. Here are echoes of Jesus words, was to come, the one who would be the 'true' vine.

All of this is background to this passage. Jesus uses this image precisely because it was part of the collective memory of God's people.

Jesus gets straight to the point. If you want the vine to grow, it needs to be pruned. Get rid of those branches that bear no fruit and prune the others that do! Since they could not make anything useful out of what was removed from the vine, its value was in being burnt for fuel.

Images can have many meanings. Who is Jesus talking about here? Is it the whole vine, representing the church that needs to get rid of dead wood, or is each branch representative of our lives? I think you could understand this image either way, but the emphasis here seems to be on the individual. *"You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you"*.

Think of the close relationship developed over the years of Jesus ministry between him and his disciples. As he speaks to them, they are the 'you' and we are the 'you'. He says to them and us; after all it is God's living word, as a branch cannot live independently from the vine, so it is with you, stick with me, stay joined to me, then and only then, you will bear fruit.

Next time you share in communion, think of this image and this close inter relationship between the cup of wine used, 'this is my blood', and the words of Jesus, "*I am the vine and you are the branches*".

One of the big challenges here is God saying to us, you can do nothing without me. Often we do not want to hear that. These are hard words for us to hear, for we want to live independent lives, to come up with solutions and to sort out our own problems. Let's be honest, there are times in our lives when we say to God, consciously or sub-consciously, we don't need you. Yet Jesus says, "*Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me*".

Branches can die and branches can be broken but the responsibility is ours. We choose, whether we stay and remain part of the vine or not. God's hand is open; it is not a clenched fist! He urges his disciples, stay rooted and God's glory will be seen in fruit, growth and life. Not the glory of the branch, but of the vine. In what we do and as we strive to live as disciples of

Jesus, we point to God. There is the vine, we are only branches. If the image points to God, the vine points to Christ.

And the life blood of this vine is love. Let us understand that the love of God was experienced by Jesus first himself, and then offered to us. This is the love of God. *For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. (John 3:16)* We are to remain in that love, and will do so, if we obey the commands of God. So Jesus asks us to do what he has already done. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22: 37)*

Images, parables and stories, they all had a purpose. The author captures this image for a reason, and I believe it brings us closer to the mind of Christ. Jesus says; see how important it is to have the joy of God in your lives and to experience his love. Without it, Christ would never have died to offer forgiveness for all.

This image has moved us a long way from the common and the ordinary and has instead focused us on the extraordinary and the eternal; it is an image infused with love, connected by love and sustained through love.

*"My commandment is this: love one another, just as love you."*  
Amen

