

Bennochy church 18th June 2017

"The wind can be blowing, but if your sail isn't raised, you won't go far. You can be surrounded by oxygen, but if you don't breathe, it won't do you any good. The sap can be flowing, but if a branch isn't connected to the vine, it will wither. If you don't have kindling and wood in your hearth, a lit match won't burn long. It's the same with the Spirit. We are surrounded with the aliveness of the Spirit. All that remains is for us to learn how to let the Spirit fill, flow and glow within us." (Brian McLaren, *We make the Road by Walking* p. 254)

Think of all the connections that we make in life. We don't choose our family, relationships do not always work out, but connections still run deep. Think of those who are adopted as young children, who still want to seek out their birth parents. We get to choose our partners, soul mates and friends. Those are the connections that often sustain us day by day. Our work colleagues, on retiring, some of those connections are broken but some remain friends for life. There are our literal neighbours. Today, connections not so easily made. There are those we connect with because we share a common interest or we happen to be in the same place at the same time, doing the same thing. There are those who make deep connections within their community and serve it by giving up of their time.

We also know that as we get older, death breaks connections. The circle gets smaller. For many in our society their

connections are so limited, that loneliness is a daily reality. There are those who feel very alone. I believe very strongly that we are, who we are, as a result of the connections we make in life. *'No man is an island'*. We have been created to connect.

In an agricultural society, Jesus often used images from nature. We might speculate as to the images he would use if speaking today. He said, *"I am the vine, and you are the branches"*. Unlike some of Jesus parables, I think the meaning here is clear. The person of faith cannot live in isolation from God and our connection to him, is through Jesus Christ. *'He is the vine, and we are the branches'*. But this image has more to it than that. It also says, no person of faith can live in isolation from the Body of Christ. As a single coal will not burn for long, so we need our connections within the community of faith. Jesus did not say, *"you are the branch"*. He said, *"you are the branches"*. We need to be connected, one to the another.

You might be thinking. That is pretty obvious. If you remove the branch from the vine, it will wither and die, and so bear no fruit. Obvious. The tragedy is this. The history of the church is littered with wounded people. Wounded by the church, people who have left, and decided to go on their own. The connection for them has been broken.

In these words there is a real challenge, to our autonomy. Jesus says, "you can do nothing without me." I want to say, we don't like that! How often have we pushed God out of the way, and said, we can solve this by ourselves? Normally that means forming a committee! That is the church way of doing things. In this analogy, that means the vine is not pruned, and instead of bearing more fruit, the connection to God, if not broken, hangs by a thread, and the glory of God is replaced by the work of humanity. We take things into our own hands and the power of God is lost.

In this passage, over and over, Jesus says '*remain*'. That seems to be the key word. If you stay connected, then the fruit will grow. If you remain; and I think we need to be careful as to how we understand these words; if you remain, ask for anything and you will have it. Jesus says, remain in my love. That is the essence of the connection. And you do that by obeying God, as Jesus himself has done. That is important. Think about that. Jesus stayed connected with God. If it is good enough for Jesus, it must surely be good enough for us!

So how do we know when a connection is strong? When everything else has been stripped away, and only love remains. That is what God offers. In life's greatest friendships we might catch a glimpse of that kind of love. I would want to say this, its origin can only be divine.

What is the greatest thing someone can do? We might say, give their life for someone else. Acts of valour? To put yourself in danger to protect others? Acts of sacrifice?

Jesus said, "*This is my body, and it is broken for you.*" Such love which makes God's connection to us unbreakable. In the actions of Jesus, we are eternally connected to God.

When bound to Jesus, there is a love so strong that we can embrace enemies. A love so strong that our hatred becomes compassion. A love so strong, that impossible words of reconciliation become reality. That is the kind of love our world desperately needs.

Power is never strength. It is love. Where there is love, there is God. We have all experienced that. That is our connection with Jesus Christ. And if God is faithful to the end, we need to stay connected, and we do that, not as individuals, but as part of the Body of Christ.

Jesus said, 'I am the vine and we are the branches'. 'Take eat'. This is what binds us, in the love and the compassion of God. Amen.