

St Marc Grenoble

Sunday 2nd May 2021 (Easter 5)

Acts 8: 26 - 40

John 15: 1 - 8

'Do you Understand?'

Good Morning:

I'm called to preach, and I love to share the Good News of Jesus. But, sometimes, like today, there are challenges; - I'd planned to preach about Philip and the Ethiopian official. But, I feel directed to speak about today's Gospel. So, we'll look briefly at Philip's story - then we'll go to the Gospel.

PRAY

Philip was one of seven deacons, 'ordained' by the Apostles, to supervise the distribution of food and other needs among the poorer believers.

However, after the Apostles had laid hands on him, and asked for the Holy Spirit to fill him, it seems that God had different plans for Philip. He became a powerful, Spirit filled evangelist - who listened to the Holy Spirit, and was open to what God wanted him to do.

This story shows that: the Holy Spirit directed Philip to go South, to the desert road, which runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip went as he was told - he had no idea why.

He came across a highly important Ethiopian official - Chancellor of the Exchequer

to the Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia - who'd been to worship in Jerusalem (that's odd in itself!).

The official was being driven home in his chariot, and as he went along we're told he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah - chapter 53.

The Holy Spirit directed Philip to approach and speak to the Ethiopian. He heard him reading and said: 'Do you understand what you are reading?'

The response came 'How can I, unless someone explains it to me?'

So, Philip was invited to sit with the Ethiopian, and starting from the prophecy in Isaiah 53, he told the whole story - the Gospel of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit was working powerfully through Philip, because the official saw water, and immediately asked to be baptised in the Name of Jesus.

Amazing! And there's more to the remarkable story - we're told the Holy Spirit whisked Philip away to another town, Azotus, immediately the official had been baptised. Tradition also tells us the official went home to Ethiopia and introduced the Christian faith there.

BUT, there's an important question for YOU ... Do you understand, I mean fully understand, what we read from the Bible, Sunday by Sunday??

I spent four years studying in two Theological colleges, and still don't fully understand it; which is why I love to keep wrestling with the Bible, to understand what it means for my relationship with God. It's a whole life journey, we all need to explore God's word, it's our guide to living with Jesus. We need to read the Bible every day.

We all need to learn more. That's why we have small groups each week. Yet, as we started exploring Acts - one of the most exciting books in the Bible, last week, only about 10 people joined us. Less than 10% of our members. Where were the other 100+ people on our membership list???

Now let's look at Jesus' words in our Gospel: Jn 15: 1 - 8. The True Vine.

I've seen vines grown in many parts of the world: Where they grow well, at the start of the season, they're pruned very hard; but, by the end of the season, they've grown strongly and produce prolific fruit.

The only reason to grow a vine is to produce fruit. That's why Jesus' word picture of the vine is so clear. We're told in Ezekiel 15, the wood of the vine is useless; it's not even good as firewood.

Why did Jesus say: "I am the true vine?" Well, the vine was used as a word picture for Israel, in several places in the Old Testament; usually as a vine that had gone wild, and disappointed the farmer.

We read in v. 1 of today's Gospel reading, Jesus is the true vine and His Father is the gardener, or vinedresser, who carefully tends for the vine.

In v. 5, we're told we are the branches. Jesus said: 'Without me ... you

can't do anything. v. 4 reminds us, "The branch can't bear fruit by itself; it must remain attached."

We're told, the vine-dresser cuts off branches that don't bear fruit. Why? Well, the whole purpose of growing a vine is for the fruit.

But branches that do bear fruit are also pruned, so they'll be more fruitful. Unnecessary growth is trimmed, so all the energy goes into producing bunches of luscious fruit. Pruning isn't punitive; it improves the fruit.

Jesus reminds us "Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." He used this word picture of the vinedresser, the vine and branches, as a word picture of our Christian lives: growing with Jesus, our sole purpose is to bear fruit; and not just perishable fruit. Later on in the chapter, Jesus says: "I appointed you to bear fruit – fruit that will last!"

Now, let's look at the picture of the vine. It gives us an image of community; one of interrelationship, mutual dependence and indwelling. Jesus says "Remain in me, and I will remain in you",

This picture is clear; to live as authentic Christians we must be co-habiting with Jesus – without being that close to Him, we can't reflect His love.

Jesus is the vine, the main stem. We are the branches. If you look closely at an old vine, you'll realise it's almost impossible to identify individual branches; they're intertwined and it's very hard to tell which is which.

The only person who understands the way it grows, is the vine-dresser who knows it intimately, who's watched and shaped its growth.

The picture of the church, our vine – the community of Jesus, is interdependence and cohabitation with Jesus. Our lives must be totally dependent on, and intertwined with, Him.

This reading makes it clear our gardener – God, will judge us on our fruitfulness; so let's stop kidding ourselves that anything else is important.

We can only be fruitful if we have a caring, interdependent relationship with Jesus, who gives us the energy we need to do His work.

v. 6 gives us a stark picture of what happens if we don't maintain that close relationship with Jesus. Like any branch that becomes detached from the main plant, or vine, Jesus says: "If anyone doesn't remain in me, they're like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked

up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

There’s no sinister threat in this description of burning; it’s simply what vine-dressers do with the pruned or shrivelled branches. It disposes of them, and prevents the spread of damaging disease.

We should take a closer look at v. 7 too, Jesus says: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want, and it will happen for you.” That’s no surprise, if you’re living closely with someone, and you care deeply for them, you want to make them happy.

So, if we are ‘abiding’ with Jesus – if we share His love and values, we’ll want what He wants and He’ll naturally give us those things – because our desires will be common with His.

Finally, I want to come back to the issue of bearing fruit; in v. 8 The word picture of the vine is about two issues, which are closely intertwined – just like the vine; it’s about the way we show our love for God, by the way we love each other.

The fruitfulness Jesus refers to is about how we reflect His sacrificial love; in the way we care for each other, and reach out to others. By doing that we not only bring joy to Jesus, we bring glory to the Father.

To reflect the love of Jesus is incredibly hard; Jesus gives His love unconditionally. His entire earthly ministry was spent showing His love and His care for the unlovely, and the unlovable.

As His disciples we’re called to do that too. I don’t know about you, I find it very difficult. It’s hard enough loving the people close to me, who share my views and my beliefs; but, I have to confess there are many people I’ve found very difficult to love unconditionally! What about you?

But, that’s what Jesus challenges us to do. He’s not only calling us to love the motley group of aspiring Christians, who share our basic beliefs. No! He’s also calling us to reflect and share His love, with people who definitely do not share our views, or our values, or even our beliefs.

That is incredibly difficult, because He wants us to maintain His values – values the people we’re called to love don’t always share.

I’ve learned during my ordained ministry, that a church that doesn’t change in this way, doesn’t grow. And, a church that doesn’t grow, will die. As a church, as disciples of Jesus, as branches on that vine, you either

live, grow and bear fruit – the fruits of unconditional love; or you wither and die. The choice is simple, even if it isn't easy.

So, pray for yourselves and pray for our church – at this time of new beginnings, that we'll grow together and learn to be fruitful branches of the True Vine; bearing the fruit of unconditional, non-judgemental love, right here in Grenoble.

It is a tough call – but : Jesus says in v. 16: **“You didn't choose me, I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my Name”**

So, let's pray, and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit, to help us, just as Jesus Promised He would...