

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

5.1.14 Joss Bray

Jesus said “I am the true vine”

We have been doing a mini series on what Jesus said about himself in the seven “I am “statements in the bible.

These are:

I am the bread of life

I am the way, the truth and the life

I am the good shepherd

I am the gate for the sheep

I am the light of the world

I am the true vine

I am the resurrection and the life

Why are we doing this?

Because the more we get to know Jesus, the better we can follow him and love him. The bible is one way of finding out more, and the Holy Spirit teaches us as well – because He is the Spirit of Jesus living in us.

Jesus explained it like this:

JN 14:25 "All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you

At the start of a new year – it is great to focus on Jesus again and start as we mean to go on.

We are up to “I am the true vine”

JN 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

JN 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The picture of the vine as Jesus

Jesus was talking about a grape vine which would be very familiar to his hearers. In this picture, he says that he is the vine – the whole thing. His DNA runs through the whole plant. And he is the “true “vine – the one that produces the right fruit which is good and nutritious.

The gardener is the Father

He looks after the vine and cuts off dead branches with no fruit and prunes the fruitful ones to produce more. He wants the vine to be healthy and produce much fruit.

The branches are us

The vine has a main stem with branches coming off and smaller branches off them eventually then producing fruit – grapes – from those.

Because we know that God has designed us to be together and that church is the way that he wants us to do that, we could visualise that the main branches are in fact churches and the smaller fruit producing branches off them are us as individuals.

Some observations about the branches -

The branches need nutrition

They cannot survive without this. Our nutrition as church and individuals has to be from Jesus. The sap that flows through us has to be the Holy Spirit. The question for us is, what do we feed on? What do we fill our time with, what do we think about most, what do we live for? What are we most connected to? Is it the world or is it Jesus? Tough questions for 2014 – but worth asking and thinking about.

The branches will all look a bit different

No two branches are the same – and no two churches are the same. Why should they be? No one branch can say to another I am better than you because I look different. The same family DNA runs through them – that is the crucial thing. Not many siblings are identical twins but there is still a family resemblance.

Is Jesus recognisable in the church? Does the church have Jesus as our source, our life, our reason for being. And is that true if you cut the whole branch through – like a stick of rock – is everything we do reflecting Jesus in some way?

The healthy branches grow

They will grow both in inherent strength and size by remaining firmly attached – they cannot grow in isolation. The church needs to be growing in both ways if it is going to be a branch of the true vine.

The healthy branch bears fruit

What is this fruit? Remember:

GAL 5:22 But **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

So a healthy branch has positive fruit and an absence of negative disease. Whatever the branch looks like, the fruit is the same. And there is a promise – “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” – that sounds exciting to me – maybe we need to keep pressing in to that promise.

Branches need to be pruned – or worse

This happens to churches and individuals. If a church is dead it is not bearing fruit – and the gardener will cut it off. It sounds brutal but that is what Jesus said. God does close churches down – we have all seen it. We see dead, or diseased churches closing – often with very difficult consequences. It is not the devil who does it although sin is usually the root of the disease. Sometimes we attribute things to the devil that are actually part of the gardeners pruning. It is a tricky area to discern at times – and not pleasant to be going through. .

But this is what Jesus says – and pruning is for the good of the branch to produce more fruit. It involves removing dead bits of course, but mostly, as I understand it, live parts of plants are cut off – buds which look promising, shoots which are about to make fruit, even offshoots that are producing fruit – all may go because the gardener has a plan. It is to strengthen the plant and produce more fruit eventually. He knows what he is doing. He will do this to make the church more healthy.

Therefore, let's bear that in mind when doors close, or situations are difficult – when we are hard pressed – God is using these to prune and shape and produce better fruit. What looks to us like a setback could give better fruit in the long term. This applies to the church and to us individually.

How about a more familiar picture?

Not many of us have vines, or have seen them being cultivated. In Jesus's day they must have been widespread, so he used that picture as a parable so people could understand what he wanted to get across to them.

We could try to illustrate the same points using McDonalds as an example. Bear with me here – it's worth a go and you can remember it every time you see one.

I am not suggesting Jesus is Ronald McDonald of course.....

If we think of McDonalds – there is a central structure and many franchised branches. They all bear the same logo, ethos, food, uniform and are instantly recognisable. They do the same thing. They have the McD DNA.

However, they are also all different. Some are big, some small, some in town, others out of town. Some in old buildings, some in new. They have different seating arrangements, opening times, and sometimes different offers, different numbers of staff etc.

The central structure supplies them with all they need which is branded – signs, menus, cookers, uniforms, training etc. But the branch needs to produce the fruit – the burgers and fries etc. If it doesn't, then it is removed from the McD franchise – because it is not a McD's anymore – and actually damages the parent company by not reflecting their values, ethos and service.

However, a branch that is doing well will be honed and shaped to do even better. One line of food may need to be cut to provide more capacity for another more popular line, seating may have to be removed or changed, toilets demolished and upgraded, good staff promoted and underperforming staff either dismissed or retrained.

How does that help then?

Well – similar principles apply to the church – which is us. It's not all the same of course, but it just illustrates the vine picture in a different way. We are not in a McChurch, but it is an interesting analogy and when we see a McDonalds we can be reminded of Jesus and the true vine.

So – for 2014?

Let's remember we are in Jesus. Let's feed on him and get our support from him and be filled with his Spirit. Let's look to be healthy and fruitful. Let's not fear pruning, but be aware that the gardener is at work, and he has a bigger plan than we understand as a branch. It is to his glory that he does it. As we remain in Jesus, we will see it literally come to fruition.