

'I am the true Vine' – Sunday 2nd May 2021

Where are your roots? What nourishes you?

For some people the answer will be family or friends or the love of a partner. For others music or a particular place. For some young people school may be a source of nourishment and challenge and growth - though not for all. Many small things may make up the everyday reality in which we are rooted and for all of us, the loss of those things is deeply painful. When life is going well the experience of being deeply rooted in somebody or something is **reciprocal**. We are nourished and in turn we commit our time and love and loyalty to that what is nourishing us whether that is family, a partner, a hobby or a school. When things are not going well, our rootedness is tested. Part of the pain of bereavement is the destabilising effect of being loosened from our roots.

Abraham was so deeply rooted in obedience to God that he was led to the edge of sanity. Philipp was rooted in his passion to tell the story of the resurrection. In Jesus' day, the Jews were rooted in the land, the law and God's Covenantal promise to Abraham that they were God's people and God, their God. That relationship was illustrated by the people as a vine which God had planted in the promised land. It grew and flourished as celebrated in Psalm 80, verses 9-12:

- 9 You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
- 10 You made room around it,
and when it had taken root, it filled the land.
- 11 The hills were covered with its shadow
and the cedars of God by its boughs.
- 12 It stretched out its branches to the Sea
and its tendrils to the River.

The image of Israel as a vine remained important into the 1st century AD when Josephus recorded that there was a life sized golden vine cast at the Eastern gate of Herod's temple. The ruins of that gate are still referred to today as 'The Golden Gate.' Those who wanted to make an offering for the upkeep of the temple would bring a golden leaf or a cluster of golden grapes and they would be hung on the golden vine.

So when Jesus said 'I am the **true** vine' he may have been contrasting himself the true, living vine to both the people of Israel who had not always remained faithful, and the dead superficiality of Herod's golden vine. As he enlarged on the metaphor, it became clear that Christ is the stem and his followers the branches. The whole vine is tended by God who is not the landowner but a hands-on gardener who labours at planting the vine, digging round it and pruning it. The concept of the Father as a labourer is startling, but that's what the word means and it is reminiscent of the first 3 chapters of Genesis where, as Cally Hammond wrote in the Church Times this week, Adam and Eve 'seem just to lounge around,' while the Father does the work of creation.

Christ as the stem of the vine, nourishing and supporting the branches is beautifully portrayed in a 12th century mosaic in the apse of the church of San Clemente in Rome (see below or full size image at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Clemente_al_Laterano). Imagine it taking up the whole of the area of Christ church above the reredos. At first sight it looks like a field of gold. But if you look closely you can see that the gold mosaic

contains the image of the arching branches of a vine - like a vast bramble patch. Within the branches, with all the exuberance of 12th century artistry you can find:

- birds - a dove, a magpie and a heron eating a snake,
- the evangelists writing their gospels,
- groups of people who seem to be teaching - one of them wearing a head covering seems to be a woman,
- and among the branches are flaming oil lamps and great baskets of fruit.

The branches of the vine spiral over the whole of the apse as if encompassing all life. A bird feeds its young in the nest and the evangelists perch uncomfortably on stone thrones set among the branches to write their gospels. It feels as if everyday life is intersecting with eternal life within the branches of the vine.

And at the centre of the great vine, in place of the stem is the cross. Christ hangs on it in triumph and there are twelve doves depicted on the cross - one for each of the disciples. The base of the cross springs from a bush of acanthus leaves and for the Greeks acanthus was a symbol of eternal life.

The Old Testament imagery of Israel as God's vine has been replaced by the image of Christ as the central nurturing stem of the vine and all of us as branches drawing spiritual strength and nourishment from Christ. Through Christ and his cross we are rooted in eternal life and the vine is tended by the Father the one of whom Christ says, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.' (John 14.11). At the top of the apse is the hand of God reaching down to the vine drawing up all of us, to the life of heaven.

The rich symbolism of Old and New testament reveals Christ as the centre of our lives. Through his cross we are both rooted in God and drawn upwards into life with God.



Apsis of the San Clemente basilica in Rome. Author: Dnajor_01. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Licence: CC-BY-SA 3.0.