2-5-21 ‘Remain in Jesus & Bear Fruit’ (Acts 8:26-end & John 15:1-8) A sermon for St James, Bolton by Rev Steve Lees

Whilst I was at the hospital the other day, I came across a book in the Chaplaincy room, which I hadn’t seen since I was a teacher many years ago. The book is called ‘Badger’s Parting Gifts’, basically it’s a lovely picture book to help children begin to make sense of death & dying. Badger’s friends sorely miss him but they each come to realise the impact he had on their lives; that his life mattered to them and this gives them strength. I guess we’ve been forced to think about such things recently with the death of Prince Philip with much media coverage and talk of his ‘legacy’; that his life mattered and made a difference. In John 15, on the night before he is about to die, Jesus teaches his disciples how to live a life that matters, and he uses a vine, branches and grapes as a picture to help them understand…perhaps he took them to a vineyard in the Kidron Valley to do this.

I expect we all want our lives to matter, to have an impact and make a difference for good. God wants that for us too but not just as a parting gift or a legacy BUT for our lives to matter in the here and now!

I’m not about to die…But in leaving St James to become chaplain at the Bradford hospitals, it feels a like a good opportunity to reflect, on an ending of sorts for me and for all of you. BUT it’s also a new beginning for each of us, & that’s what I want to concentrate on today! Jesus says to you and to me, *‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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…This is to my Father’s glory that you will bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.’* (John 15:1-2 & 8) God wants our lives to be fruitful, he wants them to matter. In fact, he wants our lives to bring him glory, that means to point others to his greatness and love. The way to do this? ‘*Remain in Jesus’*.

It really is all about Jesus. In our Acts reading, the Ethiopian discovered this as he read the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament, and wondered what on earth it was all about! Perhaps you read the Bible and feel the same? What on earth is it all about? The whole of the Bible points us towards Jesus, so ‘Led like a sheep to be slaughtered…’ (Isa 53:6) was a prophecy written hundreds of years previous, but was now fulfilled in Jesus’ sacrifice on a cross, putting us right with God the Father.

*‘Remain in Jesus’*…it sounds simple and, in a way, it is and yet in another way it demands so much from us, that it’s hard! Jesus uses the image of a vine producing a harvest of grapes to point out that God wants us to bear fruit. What fruit does he have in mind? Galatians 5 gives us a good list, *‘…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’* (Gal 5: 22-23) This is the type of fruit God wants us to produce; it’s a model to others and more than that, this fruit makes life better for others. It’s the fruit of a life that really matters; really makes a difference. We might feel, ‘I wish I was more fruitful’. That’s good because God wants that too. However, there is some uncomfortable news for us: to become more fruitful we’re likely to experience some pain. Father God, the gardener, loves us and doesn’t want us to settle with producing a couple of grapes at the bottom of a big harvest basket. He wants us to produce a harvest basket that overflows with big, fat, juicy grapes. Imagine for a moment God producing fruit in and through St James; his love, joy, peace literally overflowing so that it can’t be contained in a building or within a congregation…it spills out all over the place. We see this already as ***you*** make a difference, make life better for your neighbours, for people where you shop, where you go to school, where you go to work etc. The photos we saw earlier show how God has blessed us and blessed others through us. Let’s pray we’ll see this more and more, until love, joy, peace etc. become contagious and more people want to know where this comes from and so discover ‘*the good news about Jesus’* (Acts 8:35).

But to be more fruitful, God our Father, the gardener, will discipline & prune us. Sometimes branches don’t produce much, if any, fruit because there is something wrong. A disciple may not produce fruit because of sin in their life. If this is the case God will discipline us (see Hebrews 12:10-12), point out the sin to us, and make us feel uncomfortable so that we repent of (turn away from) the sin, receive forgiveness and be in a state once more to be fruitful. This sounds straight forward but as many of us know it can take time and be a painful process!

A branch might produce some fruit but has potential to produce so much more. I know that unless I prune back the old growth of certain plants, like rose bushes, the next harvest won’t be very good. The author, Bruce Wilkinson, whose insights I’ve used today, talks about moving house. The new house had a shared grapevine with a neighbour. When Bruce went to visit before he moved in, he was shocked to see his neighbour drastically pruning the vine. He said to him, ‘You don’t like grapes, I guess?’ His neighbour replied, ‘I love grapes.’ Bruce said, ‘Well why are you destroying the vine?’ The grey-haired neighbour said, ‘We can either grow ourselves a lot of beautiful leaves, or we can have the biggest, juiciest sweetest grapes you’ve ever seen but we can’t have both!’ Jesus knew this and said to his disciples *‘…every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful.’* (John 15:2) I wonder what pruning might look like in our lives? It will involve us becoming less self-centred and more Christ-centred. We will need to surrender control of different parts of our lives to God. That may be our money and possessions, or how we spend our time, or who we spend time with. It will be different for each of us as Jesus says to us, *‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’* (Luke 9:23) This is not really what we like to hear but as we release control to God by *‘remaining in Jesus’* the reward is a more fruitful life. We might feel like giving up at times, that it’s not worth the effort, but Jesus tells his disciples six times in this short passage to *‘remain’* or abide in Him.

Jane and I are really going to miss you all, and my ‘parting gift’ to you is to encourage you in this new beginning, to *‘remain in Jesus’.* Keep reading his Word & ask him to speak to you, let the Father discipline and prune you so that the Holy Spirit will grow much fruit in you, and release all the gifts you will need in the days to come. May God bless you, His beautiful church. Amen

Notices: From 3rd May -11th July, Steve will be on Sabbatical before becoming Hospital Chaplain on 12th July. During this period Sunday services will continue at 10.30am, often with visiting clergy leading Communion. (9th May: Rev Pee Stoodley). Some weeks will be Services of the Word led by St James’ Readers (LLMs) and Lay worship Leaders…. Some weeks we may have printed sermons to deliver but not always! \*Sunday 2nd May will be the last online service for the time-being. Zoom Bible Mondays & Zoom Wednesday Night Prayers will continue, but facebook Morning Prayer stops after Friday 3oth April.