

Acts 8. 26-40, Psalm 22. 25-31, John 15. 1-8

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Brighouse cemetery I planted a rose bush in the Garden of Remembrance, where my mum and dad's ashes are buried. I normally go frequently to look after it, but last year, as the hotels were closed, I couldn't go, and it didn't get pruned. It became tall and straggly and didn't produce the normal good flowers. I cut it down at the end of September, and when I go in a week or two, it should be all right this year, but I shall need to fertilise it.

Roses need pruning each year, as they flower on new wood. The same is true of vines. If you go to France in the early part of the year, you see the vines pruned hard back and tied up to wires. Then eventually they sprout and produce a lot of fruit.

Today's Gospel begins with one of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus, 'I am the true vine'. (Elsewhere he says, 'I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Door'). This passage is part of the long discourse in John's Gospel, where Jesus prepares his disciples for the time when he will leave them. He asks them to carry on his work.

The disciples have to realise that they are the branches with a close relationship to the vine. Jesus tells them that they won't bear fruit unless they abide in him, unless his story becomes their story. They won't be able to do anything without the strength, which they will receive from him. He is asking for their total commitment. He warns them that it won't be easy; they will face setbacks and opposition, and what is going to happen to him will, in all likelihood, happen to them too.

What God wants, says the parable, is disciples who produce much fruit. But there is a harsh lesson. Those, who are not faithful, risk being cut off and thrown away. It is a bit challenging for us to fear that we may not be very good at producing fruit. In the letter to the Romans, Paul warns his readers that they must note the kindness and the severity of God. If they don't continue in God's kindness, they will be cut off!

We might wonder how a loving God can support pruning and discarding those, whom he has created. The parable may be about not living only for ourselves and so being unfruitful, but by bringing life and sustenance to others, even though it may be costly.

There may, then, be setbacks. This spring in France the recent frost has severely damaged to grape harvest. Here the magnolias were spoilt.

I used to say to my pupils, “You may have to give up some activities for a while (prune it all a bit) in order to concentrate on your studies and perform well.”

In the first reading, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Philip teaches the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus. The Ethiopian is baptised at once, and then Philip goes on to the next stage of his mission. He is focussed on what he has to do. The story of Jesus has become his story.

In the last part of Psalm 22, the psalmist rejoices at his deliverance from torment and offers a testimony in front of the congregation, exhorting them to praise God. He will perform his vows in their presence and will provide a sacrificial meal, to which his friends are invited. He says, ‘From you comes my praise in the great congregation; I will perform my vows in the presence of those that fear you. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek the Lord shall praise him; their hearts shall live for ever.’

In the end, because of his deliverance, he expresses the vision that the whole earth, those yet unborn, and those, who have died, will accept the rule of God and will proclaim his saving acts. God’s power is seen as extending beyond death to the underworld, an early step towards belief in the resurrection.

‘How can those who sleep in the earth bow down in worship, or those who go down to the dust kneel before him? He has saved my life for himself; my descendants shall serve him; this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.’

As for Philip, the story of God has become the psalmist’s story.

Fruitfulness is seen as abundance, generosity of mind and spirit, and enriching of life, a life, which reflects the way of Jesus.

In teaching we ask for commitment, because, unless we are committed to what we are doing, we don’t flourish. I once had a Sixth Former, who lost his way, seemed unable to sort himself out and to find commitment. He underperformed at A Level. Our task as disciples is to try to commit ourselves to the way of God, in what we do and say, in our relationships with other people and in our attitude to God’s creation. If we think only of ourselves, or take the easy way, it is questionable whether we are the fruitful branches or the best flowers.

Is the story of Jesus our story? That is what Jesus was asking of his disciples, and it is what he is asking of us today.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

