

Easter 5 Year B

John 15.1-8

Apart from me you can do nothing. John 15.5

You might think, on the day when I am forcing everyone to celebrate my wife's fortieth birthday, that I would transpose the lectionary so that we heard the readings appointed for the 33rd Sunday of the Year, and in particular the text of Proverbs 31.10 "A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels." Whilst that is undoubtedly true, we are here in Eastertide with John chapter 15, but that is not entirely inappropriate, because my wife has only just returned from addressing a conference in London on the erudite subject of literary allusion in the Harry Potter novels, and, having been left on my own for two days with the children and my domestic incompetence, I have certainly found new resonance in a text which says "Without me, you can do nothing."

I am the vine, you are the branches, says Jesus to his disciples. The prophet Isaiah, more than seven hundred years earlier, had sung of the vineyard which was the chosen people of Israel, the Lord's own vine which he tended and guarded, only to see it fail to yield the expected crop. This image became basic to the self-understanding of the Jewish nation, so much so that the temple in Jerusalem was decorated above its entrance with an enormous golden vine. So when Jesus says to his followers, I am the true vine, he is saying something rather more dramatic than the image of vine and branches alone might imply. He is saying, I am the true Israel, the true temple, the true meeting point between heaven and earth, God and his people.

The image of the vine and the branches is potent well beyond its historical context, however. It is the simplicity of the idea which gives it such a power to communicate. We don't need to be skilled gardeners to recognise that a plant or a tree might have branches, and that these branches might bear fruit, just as they might be pruned or even cut off without the plant itself

ceasing to exist. I am the vine, you are the branches is then a statement of expectation and of warning – you are expected to bear fruit, and if you do not, you can expect to be cut off.

There is an attractive balance to the phrase “I am the vine, you are the branches”, a balance which has an accidental poetry about it – every word is a monosyllable until we get to the final cadence, the two syllables of the word branches. It sounds like a perfect piece of oratory. But that might encourages us to see a contrast rather than a connection, as if Jesus is saying One thing is true of me, and another thing is true of you. I am one thing, you are another thing. This isn't so, of course, because in saying “I am the vine, you are the branches” Jesus is, among other things, saying that you and I are the same thing. The branches have no existence of their own. The branches are part of the vine. It is the vine which is the thing. Once we have encountered and understood the vine, we can talk about it more easily if we divide it into component parts – trunk, branches, flower and fruit. But all of these things

are part of the vine. When Jesus tells us his followers that we are the branches he is telling us that we are part of him, and to cut off a branch is to cut off part of the vine.

Too often our Christian lives suffer from a tendency to dualism, an inclination to think that some aspect of ourselves and what we do needs to be understood as belonging to God, and the rest is up to us to do as well as we can. So we are apt, for example, to think about worshipping on Sunday as if we are giving to God the one day a week to which he is entitled. The rest of the time we are on our own. There is a connection to be made here with the way in which the text “Render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar’s” can be misused to imply that God has nothing to do with the material, and particularly nothing to do with the vulgar materiality of money and wealth. Any cursory reading of almost any part of scripture should knock such an idea on the head. Likewise, thinking of ourselves as put out at by Christ as his branches, but basically left to

ourselves to bear fruit, is a denial of what Christian identity, being united to Christ, really means.

The gift of God in Christ is nothing less than unity with him. Apart from him, we can do nothing, because apart from him we have no life at all. When we are baptised, we are united with Christ. We are not united with him for one day a week, or simply when we receive the sacrament, or when we join with others in worship. Our whole identity is constituted as inseparable from that of Christ. And so the Christian life is a life which never belongs to the individual Christian alone. Being bound into Christ entails our living a life which is part of a wider whole, a life joined with the lives of others, all of which lives are incorporated into Christ, lives which make up his body.

It is true that, when times are hard, we will think of ourselves as alone or isolated. It is true that suffering and a sense of solitude so often go hand in hand. But the Christian is baptised into the death of Christ and also into his resurrection, that is, we are united to Christ in

the depths of despair as well as in the triumph of new life. What it means to be a Christian is, among other things, never to be alone. So there is no individual Christian life, there is simply the sharing, the communion, with the life of God that we are given through grace. We are who we are in Christ: apart from me, you can do nothing. I am with you always, to the end of the age.