

Dear Friends,

The gospel reading this week is the teaching of Jesus on the image of the vine. These days the wine industry is big business. Huge numbers of people are employed in wine production, it's a massive international industry. In California the vineyards there are the second biggest tourist attraction in the whole state, only Disneyland gets more visitors. But of course wine-making isn't new, though the scale of production certainly is. Vines were very highly valued in ancient Israel. Vineyards were seen as the sign of a peaceful and settled way of life. Vines take time to grow, they needed years of tending to develop properly and become productive. People would only plant vineyards when they were confident of peace and prosperity.

The vineyard was used in the Old Testament as a picture of Israel. So it isn't surprising that Jesus took over this image and used it in the last of his "I am" sayings. So we have this picture of the vine, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. It's a familiar picture, it's a well-known image but it's one that is worth reflecting on.

There are references in this passage to pruning. We probably realise that vines do need to be pruned regularly and they need to be pruned vigorously. I read recently about someone who moved into a new house, in the garden of which there was a large peach tree. It hadn't been pruned for ages, so it was big and leafy and the peaches it produced were small and tasteless. A friend offered to prune it, and when the owner came home from work he was convinced the friend had pruned it too severely. He was sure he'd killed it and it wouldn't produce any peaches at all. In the spring there were a huge number of blossoms which turned into little green peaches. The owner wanted them left alone, but the friend insisted they needed to be thinned out. By the end of the summer the branches were so heavily laden they had to be propped up.

It's the same with vines. They have to be drastically pruned each year to conserve their energy. It's the pruning that enables them to grow vigorously the next year and put their energy into producing the fruit. That picture does have considerable relevance to church life. Sometimes we waste energy on things that aren't important. Sometimes we try to do too much and we end up not doing anything very effectively. It isn't easy but sometimes we do need to do some pruning.

In recent discussions at circuit level the question has been raised about how much we do and how much we should be doing. We're often better at starting new projects than we are at stopping those which have outlived their purpose. That links in with the image of pruning in this passage. It may seem counterintuitive but it is the pruning, the cutting back, that ensures that more fruit is produced. That is something we need to reflect on as a circuit and as a church. The vine is an image of fruitfulness and productivity. Are there things we should be doing, or not doing, that would make us more fruitful?

Best wishes,

Mark