

## Benefice of Camelot Parishes

# Keeping our connection with Christ

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A talk delivered by Rev Tristram Rae Smith on 3 May 2015

*What follows is the substance of a talk given on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2015 at St Mary's Yarlington and St Michael's North Cadbury. The texts for this Sunday were Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8 to which references (using the New Revised Standard Version) are made at various points. You may find it helps to understand this talk if you accompany it by reading these passages for yourself either in your own Bible or by using the link to the Bible Gateway.*

### **The temptation to reinvent ourselves**

What are our feelings when we move to a new place ? It may be only a few miles down the road or it may be the other end of the country. But in each case it can be tempting to 'reinvent' ourselves. After all, if no-one knows us in the new place to which we have come, no-one will know about all the mistakes we made in the place where we used to live. We can, we think, safely begin again.

I remember, for instance, the relief I felt at arriving at theological college in a different part of the country and thinking that I could leave my previous responsibilities as a lawyer behind. No longer did I have to worry about what previous clients might or might not be thinking. Unfortunately I was wrong because two years later I had to deal with an unexpected knock on my door with a claim arising out of my previous work ! Thankfully, all was dealt with to everyone's satisfaction but it was still a shock to me and a reminder that even if you try to reinvent yourself your past can still catch up with you.

And I also remember at theological college a sense of loneliness and disorientation. Moving to a new part of the country had meant losing day to day contact with many of my previous friends and so I began to look again at the whole way in which I made friendships. And all the information and insights being poured at me from all quarters made me ask what my Christian faith was really based on.

So spiritually, moving to a different place is often a chance to reassess the claims of Christ and of the church on our lives either positively or negatively. In a positive sense, we may think, well, no-one knows me here so what is there to be lost by taking the opportunity to explore Christianity a bit more deeply perhaps through joining a small group course like Pilgrim or Alpha ? On the other hand, we may have been struggling with our faith for some time and not be sure what we really believe any longer. In those circumstances a move to another part of the country can serve as an opportunity to break our ties with the church.

And the passage that we have read this morning from the book of Acts passage is also about a church which is on the move, a church which has 'reinvented' itself in response to persecution. The church had been thrown out of the security of its Jerusalem birthplace and thrown into the unfamiliar Gentile world. Of course this might have been rather liberating for some people. Perhaps Philip (the evangelist in this passage) felt a sense of freedom from stuffy rules and regulations as he found himself directed by an angel to "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" and then by the Spirit to "Go over to this chariot and join it." (see Acts 8:26 and 29).

How exciting to hear God's voice in this way, to know where you need to go and who you need to talk to and to have no committee meetings to tell you that you are wrong !

### ***Will we be pruned or thrown away ?***

So, yes, we can change the place where we live but we still remain who we are. If we have inner problems, we take these with us and sooner or later we have to face up to them. As I said earlier, our past catches up with us even if we think we are going to escape it.

So if our inner selves remain the same whatever our outward location, who are we really ? As Christians we believe that the answer to this question depends on our response to Christ. An illustration which is often used comes from the picture by Holman Hunt entitled *The Light of the World*. In this picture, Jesus is portrayed as knocking at a door which has become overgrown and has obviously not been opened for a very long time. When asked why he had not painted any handle on the door Holman Hunt explained that the door could only be opened from the inside not the outside. In other words, the picture causes us to ask whether Jesus is on the inside or the outside of our lives. And if He is on the outside knocking at the door of our hearts it is only we who can voluntarily let Him in, He will not force His way in.

And when we have opened the door of our hearts to Jesus, then a further call comes which we hear this morning in this passage from John's gospel when Jesus tells us that He is the true Vine. First we need to come to Him and then we need to remain in Him. For to remain in Jesus leads to a fruitful life and do we not all want to lead fruitful lives ?

And in fact we are presented with a very stark choice. Jesus is the true Vine and his Father is the gardener. Every branch that bears no fruit is removed while every branch that is fruitful is pruned so that it becomes even more fruitful (see John 15:1-2).

So, on the one hand, the branches that do not bear fruit are removed. If we move away from Christ then Christ moves away from us and we become disconnected from Christ. The sap of the vine no longer flows through our inner lives and we

become like withered branches which are of no use to anyone except to be thrown away and burnt (see John 15:6).

But, on the other hand, if we do remain connected to Christ and are fruitful then we face a process of pruning so that we will become even more fruitful. And pruning too involves pain. The difference here is that the pain ultimately has a joyful outcome and purpose, that we live fruitful lives for Christ.

So which would I prefer ? To be pruned or to be thrown away ? They both involve pain but one leads to lasting fruitfulness and the other to waste and destruction. Even though I do not think I would voluntarily choose to be pruned I certainly prefer it to the alternative ! So as I looked again at this passage from John's gospel this week, I looked also at my life and asked myself how (and indeed whether) God has been at work in pruning me.

And as I look at my life at this time, I find myself faced with many different questions and uncertainties on many different levels. So much so that I tell myself that there are many important ways in which I simply have no idea how life is going to work out for me. And yet within all this uncertainty I nevertheless retain a deep sense of trust in Christ, that in ways that I may not yet be able to understand He will continue to work out His purposes in my life and that these will be for the best. But in this process I simply need to trust Him, for I have no way of thinking that I will be able to achieve anything through any independent efforts of my own.

And as I considered all this, I looked again at the passage from John's gospel and I saw that coming to this total dependence on God was at the heart of the purpose of God's pruning.

*' Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.'* (John 15:4-5)

So the central call is to remain in Christ. It is impossible to bear fruit by ourselves, without this connection to Christ. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. We will bear much fruit if we remain in Him. Without Him, we can do nothing. Perhaps we begin our Christian lives thinking we can do quite a lot without Christ and yet as we continue in faith and are pruned then this truth that without Christ we can do nothing becomes more and more imprinted on our hearts.

### **Keeping the connection**

So we need to remain in Christ. But how practically do we do this ? Sometimes we can feel very disconnected spiritually if we change our circumstances and our surroundings just as I did when I went to theological college. So what is the key to continuing to grow in faith, to keeping our personal connection with Christ ?

Perhaps it helps to look at the context of these words of Jesus about being the true Vine. They were spoken shortly before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. So the disciples were facing challenge and danger. What might they have been tempted to do ? Surely to run away, to deny Christ, **not** to remain in Him, to lose their connection with Him and so their true God given lives. And how might they be able to resist this temptation ? The clue lies in the Garden of Gethsemane where the disciples were asked to keep watch and pray with Jesus, not for a long time but just for one crucial hour (see Matthew 26:36-46). Tragically the disciples proved to be unequal to this task and the rest of the story follows. They ran away when they needed to remain in Christ. And, yes, the disciples were given a second chance through God's grace but we still need to learn from their mistake.

For one way of keeping our connection with Christ is to make a regular time each day to be with Him. It may be in the morning or at a different time of the day if this is more convenient. If it is possible to shut out external distractions then this is important. In this 'desert place' of our lives we can read some Scripture and spend time praying or talking to God about our day and about the people whom we will meet or who are dear to us. And as we do this we will notice a difference in the day, we will become more conscious of Christ's presence and guidance with us.

For the real issue which we all face is not whether to go to a different place or to stay where we are. Depending on our circumstances, either course of action might be right. Rather the issue is the kind of people we are wherever we might be. We cannot escape through running away for our past catches up with us.

And, yes, we may be envious of the freedom of someone like Philip who was so directly prompted by the Spirit. And yet I am sure that his ability to know where to go and which person to go to only came from his rooted relationship with Jesus, from remaining in the Vine.

Maybe we are asking the question this morning 'What does God have for us ?'. Some of us may have a relatively clear idea as to what the answer to that question might be. Others may not be so clear and the call simply to trust comes across all the more strongly to them.

But whatever might change externally in our lives, we need to remember that it is our inner rootedness which determines our fruitfulness in Christ. And do not all of us desire lives that are fruitful ? Lives full of love for other people and where we experience joy and peace. Lives full of answered prayer and where others become disciples of Christ because they are attracted by the way that we live...

And, yes, at this time we do indeed pray for godly politicians and for the royal princess who has just been born. And yet although people in prominent positions have a great potential to influence the lives of those around them for good or ill will they in the end be more influential than the person who has truly responded to this call to come to and remain in Christ ? For this is the call of God to us this morning, a call to lead lives of true fruitfulness which have a lasting impact for good on others.

*' If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.'* (John 15:4-5)