

## Being fruitful for God John 15:1-8

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Long ago, in Holland I owned a house and one rainy day, I decided to buy a nice plant for the front garden. I know nothing of gardening, so I was quite stupid. I put the plant in the ground, close to the neighbour's garden. And soon the problems began. In many places in the garden, the branches of that plant begun to sprout. Here, there, in all the wrong places the plants came up. Especially problematic was that my neighbour also got to enjoy the plants everywhere. He did not like me for this.

I learned my lesson. In gardening, there are rules to follow. The right plant in the right place is good, and all plants need work in order to make them grow well. And in the right place.

In Israel, as most people were farmers, this was easily understood: if you want maximum fruit from the vine, you have to know how to keep it short, how to cut it. Nature left by itself does not always produce the fruit we human beings like.

The parable of the vine and the vinedresser is a beautiful image of our need to be close to our Lord Jesus Christ in order to be fruitful. I like us to look at this parable of Jesus by focussing on three aspects.

First, why does Jesus stress that He is the *true* vine?

Secondly, what sort of fruit does God expect from us?

Thirdly, how does God make us bear much fruit. What does He do for it?

### **The vine**

First – why does Jesus say he is the *true* vine? He really stresses this by saying: I am the vine, *the real one, the true one*. For this, we have to understand that Israel in those days, assumed it was the *true vine* of God. And they had good reasons for believing this. The Old Testament is full of that idea.

In Psalm 80:8-9 the writer prays to God: “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land.”

So Israel saw the vine as an image of itself. In the period before the coming of Jesus, you could even get coins in Israel with a vine on it, just like Egypt uses the eagle as a symbol for itself.

Ezekiel, Isaiah and Hosea make the same comparison of Israel as the vine. Already in the book of Deuteronomy (32:32) we read how

Moses says of Israel that ‘their grapes are grapes of poison; their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents.’

Israel was God's chosen vine, but did not bear Him fruit; instead, its fruit was bad. So it is clear enough from the Old Testament what Jesus means when he says: ‘I am the *true* vine.’

On St Augustine, in his *Tractates on the gospel of John* 80.1, preached:

When he says: I am the true vine, it is no doubt to distinguish himself from that vine to which the words are addressed: ‘how are you turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine to me?’

St Augustine quotes from Jeremiah (2:21): ‘I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?’ Israel became a wild vine, and was no longer yielding the fruit God desired from it. Jesus says: *I am the real one*.

The meaning seems quite clear. Whereas one day it was of uppermost importance to be connected to the vine of God – Israel, Jesus is now the one to be connected with, because He is the one bearing fruit for God.

Whereas God once chose Israel to be his servant, Jesus is the true fulfilment of all expectations God had of Israel once. If we want to bear fruit for God, we must be branches of the *real* vine. Belonging to *Him* is now the criterion – nothing else.

By the way, Jesus' words maybe contained also a critique of the Greek religion of those days. The god Dionysus was seen as the god of wine – and therefore of joy. Wine was seen as the blood of mother earth – the substance for making our lives happy. Jesus says: I am the real source of life and happiness, forget all other gods...

### **Bearing fruit**

As a church together and as individuals, we find our life, our fertility, our fruit, in being connected with Jesus Christ. So what do we need to do? And what sort of fruit does Jesus want us to bear? I think it is not hard to describe what He expects from us. The fruit he wants to see are works of love. Not just words, not just feelings, but actions.

St Kirillos of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 10.2:

If we demonstrate what kind of union we have by only a mere barren confession of faith – without sealing the bond of our union by the good works

that proceed from love – we will be branches indeed, but still dead and without fruit. Faith without works is dead.

Bearing fruit is not reading the bible, it is not praying much, it is not preaching. It is not about praising God in Church. It is not about playing our musical instruments beautifully. Those are good things, but they are not the fruit God wants from us.

*Doing the words of Jesus* is what it is about. Love God and love your neighbour. A life of commitment to and union with Christ has to be focused on the good of others. Maybe it is reflected in preaching, or playing music in church, in praying much, but none of those things in themselves are the fruit Jesus talks about. The fruit is our life of love for God and others.

If people are connected to our Lord Jesus but they do not bear fruit, they are in a dangerous situation. Jesus wants to very clearly warn us that we who are connected to our Lord, we will be judged in terms of our productivity of that fruit of love for God and others.

How is it possible to be connected to Jesus and not bear fruit? Well, I guess, if you go to church, enjoy it all, meet and sing, but you do not believe in Him. Or you believe in him, but you close your heart what he has to tell you. If you do not change what needs to be adapted there comes a moment of judgment. We must be very careful. Obedience is the criterion of God. Nothing less.

So this is a reason to worry. Is it? I am not so sure. I suggest, we can relax a bit. Because you know who more than you yourself wants to see you bear fruit? That is Jesus Christ himself. The vine wants to produce grapes. That is why the vine exists.

It is the desire of Jesus Christ to see you bear fruit. Why? Jesus says in John 15:8: 'This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'

The vine wants to produce maximum fruit. Jesus himself wants you to bear fruit, much more than you can ever want it – because in this way, Jesus, the Son of God, glorifies his Father.

Jesus' death is the key moment of glorification of the father – but this glorification is not complete without the fruitful obedience and union with Jesus, of his disciples. So worry not – if you are linked to the vine, and if that connection is open, then you will bear fruit. You will bear fruit.

How to keep that link with the vine open? By those things I mentioned before; listening to his word, prayers, worship, coming to church. Putting yourself in a position to be receiving from him. Those things are not the fruit itself, but

they help us produce fruit.

It is important to see the distinction. What will our Lord ask when we stand before him? Did you pray much? Did you read the Bible? No. He will ask: how did you love your neighbour as proof of your love for God.

The church is important in this. Jesus, the vine, is the head of the church. That is where he continually transfers his Holy Spirit into us, his branches. That is where he communicates his vibrancy and life into us. And with 'church' I do not mean being in the building – and not even just this meeting. It is really the community of the believers through which we receive from Him what we need for bearing fruit. That is where we learn from Him.

Also participating often in Holy Communion helps us a lot. It is easy to overlook the fact that Jesus spoke these words about the true vine and remaining in him, *at the same table* where he would just minutes later lift the cup filled with the fruit of the vine and say to his disciples that they have to drink from the wine and remember.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me... I am the true vine.'

God's eternal covenant is for those people who are connected with Jesus, the true vine. Those who drink from him, have eternal life. At Holy Communion, we are as intimate with him as we can ever get. He gives himself to us if we receive him in faith.

### **The vinedresser**

Jesus wants to honour his Father by making us produce much fruit. By living a daily life that honours God because it is full of his love and peace and joy. But the Father himself is also involved in making us bear more fruit.

Fruit does not come by itself. Vines need constant care and several years of watchful cultivation are necessary before they bear fruit. A vineyard calls for harder and more regular labour than any other form of agriculture. Constant pruning of the vines is necessary if the clusters of grapes are to grow to full maturity. The leaves have to be taken away, useless branches cut off.

It is Jesus, who through his Word, through fellow believers, through Holy Communion comes to us to offer his Holy Spirit to work in us. And then the Father becomes involved in pruning, cutting. The Father is the vinedresser. In Greek: *ho georgos*, where our name Girgis comes from. It really means: the farmer.

There is very personal and direct involvement of God the Father himself to see you mature. The work of the Spirit in our lives comes from being connected with Jesus, the pruning comes from the Father. All three together work in our

lives to make us look more like... more like the Trinity really in its internal relationship of love and peace and joy between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is glorified as we reflect who He is.

Those who bear good fruit are pruned more and more. The one who lives for God is never finished growing more. God is not content with half-hearted commitment. He wants our whole life to be filled with love for Him and our friends.

The process of cleaning, of pruning, is called sanctification in the Bible. This is a painful process. The Father must trim away our selfishness, our misguided busyness, our sins, our bad habits and desires, in order to let the true life of love develop.

This pruning refers to discipline in our life through God's word, through the people around us, and through our circumstances. God uses many ways to teach us the most important lessons of life. And much of the pruning is not even about sins or bad things in our lives.

### **Conclusion**

The great life of Jesus is in us as we are connected with him. But more needs to be done. Left to itself, the vine produces large quantities of leaves, and this tendency must be checked in

order to create maximum fruitfulness.

Leaves draw all powers of the vine away. The leaves of the vine are great, they look good – but they extract the juices of the vine so that less grapes are produced.

What leaves do we produce? The things that are not bad in themselves but that are really not helpful for bearing much fruit?

God wants to see acts of love. It is not bad at all to take your life under the microscope sometime and see what you are doing. Or to ask someone else to help evaluate what you are doing. Is what I do the fruit God expects of my life?

It is so easy to do so many things that are very good, to be so active, to do this and that. We go to Christian meetings, we go to worship meetings, we spend time at church, we search the web for more information, we make sure we are present at every birthday of every distant cousin... Many things are good... but just wonder, is this the fruit of peace and love and joy our Lord wants from us?

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**