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Christ Church West Wimbledon
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“Fifth Sunday of Easter”

I AM THE VINE – 2 MAY 2021

In one job as a Vicar, I lived for a while in a house rented by the diocese from a private landlord and which was subject to 6 monthly inspections by the managing agents. This particular house boasted a large vine in the conservatory which became a real headache for me – mainly through the relentless work of having to prune it and care for it, all to ensure that it still remained alive both for the regular inspections and for the end of my tenancy. Ever since those nerve-wracking days, I have great respect for those who tend vines – it’s hard work!

I suspect that the image of the vine was a good one for Jesus to use as his audience would easily understand and relate to it. In verse 1 Jesus presents himself as the true vine and his Father as the vine grower; in verse 5 he underlines the link between himself, the vine, and his disciples, who are the branches. Subtly, Jesus moves from the cleansing of the branches by his Father to their remaining in him. Later on, there is the harsher picture of one who does not remain in him – he is discarded and withers, left to be picked up and burnt. In the final two verses the idea of remaining in Jesus leads to prayers being positively answered and the glorification of the Father.

So in the parable of the vine, there is a real connectedness between God, Jesus and the disciples through the image of the vine. We are commanded to remain in him, for how else can we be fed and nurtured. At times of course the vine has to be carefully pruned and cut back – and this is done to promote new and fresh growth. John emphasises both our need to be attached to the one true Vine in order to produce fruit and he helps us to see that the real love of God is bound to lead us on to love one another in the same tender, unselfish way that he loves us. This is why the image of the vine and its branches is such a vivid and useful one for Christians. Being joined on to the vine makes all the difference – we cannot expect to produce spiritual fruit unless we are well attached, with the life sap flowing through us. We aren't Christians in isolation – we are all connected together and our connectedness is most evident when we gather as the one family of God to worship together. What we do here together, week by week, is what links us, the branches, to the centre, to the vine. We can be faithful as Christians if we are attached to the true vine in order to bear fruit, with Jesus as the vine and his Father as the gardener.

This is an easily understood image. After all, why does a gardener plant a vine and tend it? For the fruit. Imagine wine being made from the fruit of our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – all possible because of Jesus flowing through our living and growing. But in order to produce such fruit we need to be joined onto the one true vine. Everything we do both as individual disciples and together as a church flows from our sharing together as different branches of the one vine.

But let's go one stage further. For a moment, forget the Johannine image of Jesus as the vine with Christian disciples, in all their wide variety, as the branches. What about if the one vine actually represented our world and the many branches represented all the peoples of the world? How would that look? Every single person

in our world connected together as one by the one vine, growing and flourishing strongly. What I mean by that is – every single person in our world whatever their race, ethnicity, colour, gender, sexuality, language, background, education, and so on. All connected together to the one vine of our world.

Why am I planting such a picture today? I suppose I am wondering aloud whether, if all human beings could respect such an image, it could mean an end, once and for all, to so many of the problems of our world which are linked to racism, to discrimination in all its many forms, to all the inequalities and injustices which are suffered by so many millions in our world today?

When I meet or see another human being, what do I see? Put very simply, first and foremost, I see a person, a ‘human being regarded as an individual’ as the dictionary defines it. I would then go on to notice other things – such as their gender, their ethnicity; when I get to know their name, I might discover something of their background, learn of their story. But, first and foremost, I see a person who I literally take at face value – and I think that basic instinct has been embedded in my character and personality for as long as I can remember. So, it follows that I feel genuine pain and anger when I chance upon discrimination of any kind to another human being. Is this all too simplistic? Quite probably. But many of you, like me, have been very disturbed by the recent reports of racism in the church and how racist, as an institution, the Church of England has apparently become. The same is likely to be an aspect of many other organisations and so all credit goes to those who are trying to change how things are done.

But what is the solution? Who knows, one day might we be brave enough to post this statement on our exterior church notice board? *“We are a welcoming and inclusive Christian community built on the understanding that God accepts us equally, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, social standing, belief, age or ability –*

and believing that God calls us to equally share that unconditional love with all people, without exception”.

Of course, we might want to reflect on this subject more widely than a short sermon can try to tackle. Maybe though there is one small step we can take this morning. Can we hold onto the image of the one vine, representing the world, with all the different branches representing the peoples of our world? Can we learn to view each person we meet as grafted, along with us, onto that one vine? One world made up of billions of people – all deserving of equal rights, full respect and total dignity. As individuals we may not be able to change and transform such a large body as the Church of England – but we can start with ourselves as Christians, here and now.

The hymn our choir will be singing at Communion is the wonderfully simple prayer of St Francis, with its petition *‘Make me a channel of your peace’*. If each of us could be such a channel in our communities, who knows what sort of positive changes in the world could be created or brought about?