

Sermon St Swithuns 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Acts 8: 26-40

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:*

*'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation justice was denied him.*

*Who can describe his generation?*

*For his life is taken away from the earth.'*

*The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

John 15: 1-8

*[Jesus said] 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 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.*

Quick quiz:

Fruit, Vegetable or neither...shout out

- Apple (Fruit)
- Cabbage (Vegetable)
- Tomato (Fruit)
- Courgette (Fruit)
- Banana (Neither ...it's a berry)
- Peach (Fruit)
- Rhubarb (Vegetable)

This sermon counts as one of your "five-a-day".

Fruit is good. It is good to eat and it is very good for us.

Fruit and fruitfulness is also something we talk a lot about.

When work goes well we talk about a fruitful time.

If something we have been doing nears completion we talk about it coming to fruition.

If we make something we might call it the fruit of our labours.

If you go to the market or to a supermarket, the huge amounts of fruit that are available to buy remind us of how much that is the best that we can have for our health actually grows out of the soil.

Growing fruit, tending and harvesting goes on all around the world. The knowledge of how to do this effectively has been around for a very long time, as we can tell from our gospel reading. Its like an episode of gardener's question time.

Jesus talking to his disciples uses an allegory, an illustration of grapes growing on a vine and the things that an expert grower might do to help the vine produce more fruit.

The disciples would have recognised the idea of a vine and pruning the vine. They would have seen vines being grown and tended all over the countryside where they lived.

They would also have recognised that the image of a vine was a powerful one in the history of Israel. In the Hebrew hymn book, the book of Psalms, Psalm 80 has the image of the people of Israel being like a vine that God brought from Egypt and planted in the promised land, where it flourished and filled the land.

So, when Jesus said to his friends "I am the true vine" he was saying something which could have sounded significant and even revolutionary.

"I am the true Israel" is one way the disciples could have interpreted what he said. From now on the people of God would be defined by Jesus.

The illustration of a vine is clever. It teaches us about fruitfulness. It also has a deep meaning about the centrality of Jesus in the way God relates to humankind and how people are joined to God through Jesus.

The people of God from the start have been given the responsibility to be fruitful.

Now Jesus develops his picture of the vine to tell his friends about how to be fully alive and how to bear fruit for God.

Jesus is like the vine, the main plant. People are like branches, the places where fruit can grow.

God in the allegory is like a gardener who tends the vine and the branches in order to encourage more and better fruit.

The fruit is what God wants to find growing in the lives of people.

What do you think fruit for God looks like in your life?

Its quite easy (I think) to answer this important question with ideas that fruit for God is all about things that we do that will please God.

Like working hard. Doing good deeds. Giving to charity.

These are good and they might well be signs of a fruitful life.

The illustration of the vine and the branches shows us that it is more than that.

Like the way that nutrients and water can only reach the leaves of a plant if the branches stay joined to the stem, we are capable of producing fruit for God only if we remain joined to God in Jesus.

If what we do in our lives is to be fruit for God, then these deeds must be fuelled and powered by the life-force that comes through Jesus.

I am thinking about what St Paul called the "Fruits of the [Holy] Spirit" in his letter to the church in Galatia (Galatians 5:22-23).

These fruits are listed by Paul as Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self Control.

If these are the driving forces behind our good works, then fruit that pleases God will result.

I am not saying that we can just sit back and let the Holy Spirit produce all the fruit in our lives.

I am saying that the things we do, when motivated by the life force of the Holy Spirit will produce fruit for God.

This is good, isn't it?

Regardless of our human limitations, God can and does work in us to produce fruit.

We can be confident in God to provide what we need to do whatever is required for fruitfulness. This is the point behind the astonishing promise of Jesus in verse 7:

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

There is a lovely vivid example of someone being fruitful in God's service in our other reading today.

It takes place in the early period of the development of the church, after the resurrection and after Jesus had been taken away from earth.

In the story of Philip's conversation with the Ethiopian Court Official, we can see a number of those fruits of the Holy Spirit at work.

There is plenty of Love at work. Love for God and for this person from a distant and different culture. We see kindness as Philip helps the eunuch to understand the Old Testament scriptures and how they point to Jesus.

Philip shows that the Holy Spirit is producing abundant Generosity and Faithfulness in his life as he hears and obeys the Godly instruction to go into the desert and to interact with the stranger in his carriage.

All of Philip's obedient action is fruit for God. And the over-all result is also fruitful as a new person discovers God's love for themselves.

I used to find the book of the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible rather irritating. Characters like Philip, Peter and Paul are shown doing amazing things and the young church growing and thriving in a way that seems a long way from what we experience today.

As I have grown up in faith, I have come to recognise that these were ordinary people like us.

The same God was at work in them as is alive in the church today.

God's Holy Spirit produces fruit in God's people today just as she did then.

If the drama and the scale of what we read about in Acts seems a world away from our experience of being fruitful for God now, what can we learn from our two readings that might help us to see more fruitfulness in our lives and in our church life here in Hither Green?

In his allegory of the vine, Jesus encourages his friends to "abide" in him.

Like the close connection of a branch to the stem of a plant, being closely connected to Jesus is the secret to fruitfulness.

Maintaining that connection is something that we need to do actively, on our own and as a church.

A habit of regular prayer and bible reading is a great way to come close to God. It is also a great way to find that God wants to come close to us as individuals.

And meeting together as a church for worship (even without singing) and considering the word of God together is a way to find encouragement and inspiration in our spiritual life. Church is an essential element for staying connected with God. And church is a place where God comes close to us too.

In our personal lives and as a church, the process of abiding in God is a two-way process.

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, it is clear that the Holy spirit is involved, sending Philip to the correct place, leading him to the chariot and preparing the Ethiopian to be ready with questions.

In Jesus' allegory of the vine, it is clear that God the vine-dresser is involved and wants to see that we produce more and better fruit. The idea of pruning sounds painful and I am sure that sometimes becoming more fruitful for God may require us to endure some tough lessons and perhaps sacrifices. However, as Bishop Tom Wright points out, God is close and working with meticulous care when there is pruning work going on.

Last week I was at my other church for Sunday morning, so when I arrived back at St Swithuns I missed the APCM (Enita and Olivia saw me arriving late and told me off).

When I heard how people had been ready to volunteer for positions as church warden, on the Deanery Synod and on the PCC, I felt a real sense that God is at work in our church here. There is much fruit already appearing and much to do to make the love of God known in our neighbourhood.

Jesus said "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Amen