**2nd May 2021**

A gathering prayer

We gather here, O Lord, for you, the vine, to nourish us.
May we, the branches, draw our strength from you,
and grow in harmony, unity and love.
May we find nourishment through our rootedness
in the life, teachings and love of Christ.
Receive the fruits of our worship and be glorified.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

Eternal God,
we come as one and we come together,
to draw from the source of your life-giving love,
to reconnect with one another and with you,
to listen to your word,
to meet you in prayer and praise,
and to learn and grow as your faithful disciples –


A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

Gracious God,
we come to you aware of our failings and conscious that we have tried to live in our own strength.
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have resisted the challenge of change and not trusted your truth.
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have rooted ourselves in our wills and not in your word.
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We have looked for quick fixes and not kingdom-shaped growth.
Forgive us and reconnect us to your vine.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord, we thank you that when our faith becomes straggly, you prune it with your wisdom;
when it becomes malnourished, you nurture it with your grace;
when it becomes brittle, you strengthen it with your truth;
when it becomes barren, you restore it with your life-giving energy, forgiveness and love.
Amen.

**John 15. 1-8**

I don’t know what season of the year you enjoy the most but spring is often most people’s favourite. The contrast between the dark bare winter and the new life and colour of spring makes this season a joy and a refreshing change.

If the old adage "April showers bring May flowers" stands true, much of the UK will be in for a disappointment now the calendar turns to May.

That's because it has been a month for the record books as the nation has already seen itsfrostiest April ever and is inching closer to what will likely be one of the driest Aprils on record.[[1]](#endnote-1)

I know many of you enjoy your gardens and of course with spring the garden is full of colour again and it is a delight to behold.

In our biblical text for today Jesus goes horticultural. He says I am the vine you are the branches - abide in him and you will bear much fruit.

Jesus used stories that people could relate to everyday things that they understood, but the stories had lots of meaning and messages entwined in the analogies Jesus used.

When Jesus spoke about vineyards the people of Israel would have known what he was talking about. Growing grapes was an important industry that had been cultivated over years. Isaiah pictured Israel, the people of God, as the vineyard of God when he said “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel”. Israel was the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham.

In this story Jesus likened himself to the vine, while the fruit bearing branches represented his followers the disciples. God is depicted as the Gardener who tends and cares for the vine.

**Three things I want to briefly comment on. Pruning, abiding, and bearing fruit.**

As all gardeners know the branches of the vine need to be **pruned a**nd the dead wood removed for new growth to take place.

I remember how a former warden of St Cuthbert’s on Holy Island, Ian Fosten wrote about how one April he was walking the pilgrimage route to Santiago Compostela in northern Spain. The weather wasn’t very sunny and as he trod through the Rioja wine region, cold wet and footsore, he passed through vineyards showing little sign of promise – just rows upon rows of gnarled stumps beneath waist high wires.

He recalled that within the plant world, grape vines present a paradox. He learned this from a gardening expert on a radio show. To a woman’s question, ‘how can I get sweet and tasty grapes on my vine?’ he replied that once the bunches begin to form, she should reduce their number by as much as she dared, then she should cut back some more. She should go and have a cup of tea and then prune some more until she wept at the apparent loss. ‘Then’ he concluded, ‘you will have yourself some sweet and tasty grapes!’

Ian Fosten concludes that in choosing the vine as his analogy Jesus teaches us that it is out of the tough calls, the knock backs, the weariness, and the hard pruning of life’s events that the sweetest wine of the kingdom is produced.

I listened to a podcast the other week about future church, after the pandemic. The speaker, John Mark Comer, said that the most churches could hope for during this pandemic is to persevere and survive. The last year has been hard to make any strides forward. If you’re criteria in life was to be happy, then the last year would have been difficult. If, however your criteria were to be more like Christ then the last year may have given you opportunity. Because often it is in the hard points of life, that real growth happens.

I know in my own life that it is when I’m faced with failure, with conflicts, with disagreements , with the challenge to love through all that that I have to flex the muscle of faith, what do I believe, what , or who, do I base my life on, who do I confide in, who do I turn to, how honest am I with myself, do I have the courage to look at my own behaviour and reactions and as a Christian, a follower of Christ, how is my life shaping up to be more Christ centred?

That’s the pruning. Not typically easy, or pleasant – but essential for real growth. Can we therefore not try to be too precious or overly protective of ourselves or others but to trust our lives to the pruning wisdom of God?

When we are in community in the church – it can get painful at times. We can feel the sharp cuts of other’s secateurs. How we respond is part of our growth – how sweet and tasty we can become – or how bitter and sour we may turn out.

**The second is also essential: abiding in Christ**. Because if we talk about growth, development, change the question is in what direction? Growth in what? Development where? Where is our direction of travel? Jesus tells his followers to remain in me and I in you.

The word for remain literally means abide, invite me into your house, lets hang out together. Let’s chill, chat, disagree, argue, debate but at least have dialogue and companionship.

How do we abide in Christ? Obviously in a spiritual way. Jesus is not present to us physically but spiritually. An essential part of being a Christian is to open your lives up, your soul your spirit up – to the spirit of Jesus. The chapters around this one in john’s gospel is Jesus’ teaching on receiving and living in His Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, fill me, dwell within, abide, chill out with me.

We practice this abiding in prayer, in silence and solitude, in praise and thankfulness, in bible reading and study, in service and fellowship with other Christians, other people who have Christ abiding in them,

If we go it alone, we don’t have the support and encouragement of the vine. In fact we usually wither and die. We need Christ as our root and foundation and the rest of the vine, our Christian community, to support and encourage our new growth. Which is why it is great to be back together, even in a limited way.

**The third point is to bear fruit., showing yourselves to be my disciples.**

Fruit is about showing ourselves to be followers of Christ. So, when our lives produce evidence of following Jesus, we are bearing fruit. Fruit such as love, joy, peace, but also a passion for just living, a concern for those who are disadvantaged or ostracised by society, a concern for healing and reconciliation, the fruit of being able to love yourself, love God and love your neighbour. All the marks of Jesus.

I got a pack of cards the other day called Table talk. It tries to prompt meaningful conversations about what has happened to us in the last year.

The pack says ‘*there is a need to recover well. Rather than rush into the new and firmly shut the door on what has gone before, it’s important to take time to reflect on what we’ve been through, acknowledge how we’re feeling and look to what’s ahead’.* [[2]](#endnote-2)

It asks questions such as:

As you reflect back on recent events, what have you learnt about yourself?

When you look back on this time, what will you wish you spent more or less time doing?

What coping strategies have served you well?

How do you view life differently now?

What are you most anxious about as you think about the future?

What are you most excited about as you think of the future?

Working through such questions, with the Lord, will, I hope, lead you to bear fruit: that this pandemic may have borne fruit for you. Like the spring buds germinating at this time can we see signs of fruit from the pandemic.

I know for myself, personally, it has been a time to take stock of my busyness and consider what things I need to put down and what things I need to take up. I have enjoyed the prayer course I did last summer to explore new ways of prayer. I worked through the enneagram, an ancient spiritual exercise, to help you discover your personality and behaviour: what are your impulses and passions, your strengths, and weaknesses – how can you find freedom from self-destructive patterns and help your spiritual growth.[[3]](#endnote-3)

I know others have done the Stepwise course from the URC helping people look at their faith. Some have been working through Christian doctrine looking at our beliefs. Other did a course on mindfulness. All useful stuff I hope in the journey of growth and bearing fruit, becoming more Christlike.

Going back to the podcast I listened to about future church, the speaker said the church faces many challenges coming out of the pandemic, that were already there before the pandemic, but the pandemic has accelerated some of them. Challenges such as individualism and loneliness; the digital revolution and how we can distract ourselves into spiritual oblivion. The polarization we can have in society because we only listen to people who believe the same things as ourselves and how that polarization can lead to outrage and enemy making. The challenges of injustices in our world from racism to poverty. Burn out society – where people are too tired to live well and how that leads to a lack of spiritual vitality.

Coming out as a church we need to consider how we can structure our life together as the Body of Christ to guard and guide us into bearing fruit. A bit like a trellis, to support and encourage the vine to grow – we need a rule of life, practices, habits, spaces to help us be like Jesus, to grow in the spirit, to help others grow in the spirit of Christ.

We look to rebuild this in the coming months to encourage us as a church to grow and bear fruit.

Not for just for ourselves but also for others so we can make a difference in our world. Next week we will look at the rest of this chapter and loving others and being friends of Christ.

Jesus is the vine we are the branches – we are called to abide in Him. There will be times of pruning, pruning is necessary in order to bear fruit; the fruit that shows we are followers of Jesus.

Prayers of intercession

God of comfort,
as India faces the ravages of corona virus we pray for some relief for their suffering. May those in this world who have an excess of medicine and oxygen be moved to generosity and may those who face great anguish find some measure of comfort. Even as our situation with the virus changes here we are mindful of the many families across this country who are still trying to come to terms with the death of a loved one. We pray for everyone struggling with the pain of loss. Bring solace to them, bring people who can offer words and actions that sooth, and help all those who grieve to find small shoots of hope for the future.

God of comfort,
listen to our prayer.

God of truth,
the recent tension in parliament and the complications around truth and honesty can be difficult for us to process. We pray for a spirit of openness and fairness for those elected to govern us. Renew their vision for their role in society and bring people into the centre of government who have a spirit of service and integrity. Help those who make decisions to see the true plight of the poorest and most disadvantage in our society and look for that will bring about deep and lasting change.

God of truth,
listen to our prayer.

God of community,
we acknowledge the wide variety of feelings within our local communities prompted by the change to the lock down. From those who are exhilarated by trips to the hairdressers or the pub, to some who remain anxious about the possibility of a new surge, may we find understanding and empathy for one another. Give us all the ability to think in terms of the whole community not just about ourselves and help us to keep our eyes wide open to truly see how those around us are coping as things change.

God of community,
listen to our prayer.

God of love,
thank you that we are all connected to you our true vine. When we feel disconnected from our communities, families or even ourselves help us to picture this image of the vine and feel rooted in you and your comfort, justice, truth, community, hope and compassion.

God of love,
listen to our prayer. Amen.



A Reflective prayer

*A meditation on ‘I am the vine’. Read it slowly with significant pauses after each line.*

I am the vine.
I am your origin, your nutrients, your mainstay.
Root yourself in me.
Let yourself be fed.
Let yourself grow…closer and deeper.
And in the growing, allow the pruning.
Allow me to prune, to trim, to cut away your broken branches,
your fruitless parts,
your strivings,
branches that are going to seed.
And watch and wait.
Wait for the new shoots.
Wait for the new fruits to bud slowly and open gently.
Turn to my warmth, and let your fruits open in my glory.
Amen.



A sending out prayer

As we leave this place,
may we abide with God,
grafted and rooted and pruned.
Lord, help us to stay connected to one another and to you,
bearing fruit wherever your love takes us.
Amen.

1. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/29/weather/record-frost-dry-uk-april/index.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://uglyducklingresources.org/collections/table-talk/products/table-talk-for-change> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-descriptions> <https://practicingtheway.org/identity/part-three> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)