



# SPEAK, LORD, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING

## John 15:1-8

### I am the vine — you are the branches

John 15:1 [Jesus said:] “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. 2 He takes away every branch that does not bear fruit in me. He prunes every branch that bears fruit so that it will bear more fruit. 3 You are clean already because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.

John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch, and dries up; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and are burned up. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is honored by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples.

#### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Like all the speeches in this Gospel, this is a meditation on the presence of the Risen Lord to believers, written after the resurrection and thus not really a report of Jesus’ actual words. Nevertheless, it is a meditation on images Jesus did himself use, such as the parable of the vineyard, with echoes of other passages from the Old Testament. This passage indeed sounds a bit like a parable but is really a symbolic allegory, wherein each element can be “decoded” for meaning. This reflection is found in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel and is best understood within that special context.

#### KIND OF WRITING

### III. THE BOOK OF GLORY

(13:1-20:31)

- A. *The Last Discourse* (13:1-17:26)
- i. Making God known: the foot-washing and the morsel (13:1-38)
  - ii. Departure (14:1-31)

- iii. To abide, to love, and to be hated (15:1-16:3)
- iv. Departure (16:4-33)
- v. Making God known: Jesus’ final prayer (17:1-26)

#### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The imagery of the vineyard is used in the Old Testament to express God’s relationship with Israel, both positively and negatively.

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. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. (Psalms 80:8-13)

Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21)

When I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them. (Jeremiah 8:13)

Then he took a seed from the land, placed it in fertile soil; A plant by abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig. It sprouted and became a vine spreading out, but low; Its branches turned toward him, its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine; it brought forth

#### Thought for the day

In the Bible, things from everyday life are used to speak of God. Two good examples would be those staples of the Mediterranean, the olive and the vine. In particular, the vine lends itself to metaphorical reference. It takes great tending; at the same time, it is obvious that even the furthest tendril “must with the vine be one.” By staying connected and with careful pruning, the fruit itself is “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). No need to mention the wine!

#### Prayer

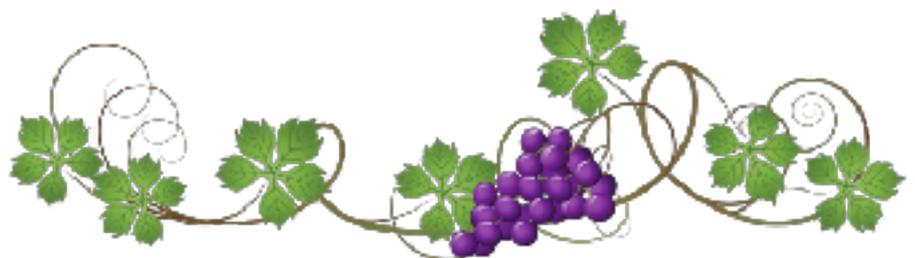
Help us, God of all growth, to be one with the true vine, Christ our Lord. May the difficult experiences which prune us make us more abundant in the fruits of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). Amen.

branches, put forth foliage. (Ezekiel 17:5-6)

Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. (Hosea 10:1)

#### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) Then he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat



him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. (Mark 12:1-9)

(2) Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the *fruit of the vine* until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God. (Mark 14:25; see also Matt 26:29; Luke 22:18).

(3) The Wedding Feast of Cana, with the excess of *wine* is an important link in this Gospel (John 2:1-11).

(4) A jar full of sour wine was there, so they put a sponge soaked in sour wine on a branch of hyssop and lifted it to his mouth. When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:29-30)

#### ST PAUL

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:17-24)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** "I AM" echoes the name of God from Exodus 3:14. There are seven significant "I AM" sentences in this Gospel, such as the bread of life, the light of the world, resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life.

**Verse 2** Continuing the language of horticulture, the vine grower "prunes" the vine, that is, he cuts back in order to stimulate even greater fruitfulness.

**Verse 3** The metaphor is abandoned briefly to make it clear that the (spiritual) pruning is brought about by Jesus' teaching. Cleansed was already used, significantly, in John 13:10-11, at the washing of the feet.

**Verse 4** "Abide" has a special force and frequency (John 1:32-33, 38-39; 2:12; 3:36; 4:40; 5:38; 6:27, 56; 7:9; 8:31, 35; 9:41; 10:40; 11:6, 54; 12:24, 34, 46; 14:10, 17, 25; 15:4-7, 9-10, 16; 19:31; 21:22-23). It expresses that deep spiritual intimacy between Jesus and the believer. See the very next verses: *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* (John 15:9-10). The vinicultural imagery is then resumed. Anyone who has seen a vine knows that the branches must stay attached to the main root, otherwise they are cut off from the very source of life.

**Verse 5** This verse opens with a repeat of v. 1, but the imagery moves forward "you are the branches". V. 5bc says the same thing, positively and negatively.

**Verse 6** This verse uses "fire" to talk about the consequences of being cut off: that is judgement at the end.

**Verse 7** Moving on from the threat in v. 6, the writer explores the benefits of staying attached to the vine. It echoes the Synoptic teaching "ask and you will receive", but makes clear the condition for successful prayer is abiding in him. If we do abide in him, then what we desire will be whatever it is the Risen Lord himself wants to give us.

**Verse 8** "Glory" in this gospel means the disclosure of the true identity of God-as-love on the cross. By their being pruned, the disciples too experience trial but by their faithfulness to Jesus they also disclose God's true identity and thus share in the very ministry of Jesus.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** In a relationship connectedness is important. Relationships cannot be taken for granted and need time and care to be life-giving. What does your experience tell you of the truth of this in your relationships with God, with your friends, with your family, with communities or groups to which you belong?

**2.** "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit". In what ways do you see that you have been 'pruned' by the experiences of life, or by the word of God, to be a more fruitful person? Perhaps you have also experienced the need for "pruning" in significant relationships in your life.

**3.** The parable also reminds us that we are not the source of our own life. It is a gift from God, from our parents, and from all who have nourished us. Give thanks for those who have been a source of life for you.

**4.** God is glorified by our being fruitful. When has human fruitfulness reminded you of God at work in our world?

#### PRAYER

O God, you graft us on to Christ, the true vine, and, with tireless care, you nurture our growth in knowledge and reverence.

Tend the vineyard of your Church, that in Christ each branch may bring forth to the glory of your name abundant fruits of faith and love.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit God for ever and ever. Amen.

