

1 JOHN 4:7-END
JOHN 15:1-17

PRODUCTIVITY AND PROTECTION

Most people have a sense of wanting to do something worthwhile with their lives, to be fruitful in some way. There are many people who get part way through their lives feeling they could have done so much more; feeling that they haven't much to show for their years, wondering what their purpose has been. Many people fail to reach forward to do more because they also want to feel safe. Is it possible to be fruitful and also to feel safe?

Today I want to talk about **productivity and protection** in the light of Jesus' words in John 15.

PRODUCTIVITY

A vine is a symbol of life and fruitfulness. In the Bible, Psalm 128 v.3 speaks about a trusting woman being like a fruitful vine with many children! Proverbs 31 v.16 has a good wife planting a vine; Isaiah 5 has God planting a vine and Psalm 80 talks about Israel as being that vine – brought out of Egypt in the Exodus, planted into a new land in place of the other nations there.

So the vine is a symbol of God's goodness and new life for people who've been rescued and stay close to God. The vine is nourished and it grows and flourishes and provides protection from the heat with its shade. But after a while it's attacked and damaged by 'wild beasts' (the enemy nations). Why? Why is Israel struggling? (Psalm 80:8-18)

Go back to Isaiah and we find him saying that God '*looked for a crop of good grapes but it only yielded bad fruit.*' (5:4) It's like the people of Israel and Judah, says Isaiah. God looks for justice but sees only bloodshed; he looks for righteousness but hears cries of distress, as his trusted people treat others badly. They are not fruitful people any more. They are more interested in their own leisure and pleasure.

So now the vine is ravaged and the only way back is when this honest cry comes out '*Let your hand rest on....the son of man you raised up...then we will not turn away....revive us and we will call on your name*' (psalm 80:17)

They were fruitful when they stayed close to God. They did the right things and they enjoyed his protection. When they began to do just what they wanted, that was when they suffered. It would be down to God with the '*son of man*' he would raise up, to change things. And he did, when Jesus came.

Jesus also told a story of a vine. He told the story of how tenants meant to care for the vineyard (the religious people of the day) had failed. They had ignored or mistreated God's representatives (the prophets) and in the story, as in real life, they would kill the son and heir, all to protect their own interests.

The vine represents life, abundance, fruitfulness, sweet, succulent fruit. It's how Israel was meant to be- giving life to people round about, in the way they lived. Yet they had failed. Now Jesus has to be that vine, that life-giver. But it still needs people to stay close, to stick with him.

So he says : *remain in me and I will remain in you...if someone remains in me he will bear much fruit-but without me you can do nothing(John 15:4)* That's pretty close to the plea of Israel in Psalm 80:18 – revive us and we'll return.

In a way, these verses (which are not mentioned in any other gospel) sum up the whole of Jesus' message: you're meant to be fruitful, productive, full of life yourselves and giving life to others but you simply can't do it on your own, detached from the vine. Try to go it alone and you'll be like the dead wood that just has to get cleared out (v.6).

So we are meant to be like branches that bear fruit. Life with Jesus is not just about contentment and feeling comfortable for our own future. It is about the productivity that actually many people feel they are lacking. Living a life that bears fruit is about obeying God's commands and loving one another to the degree and in the way that Jesus loved (v.10,12) '*obey my commands and you will remain in my love... love each other as I have loved you.* And what does that mean? Be ready to *lay down your life.* (v.13) giving up what

matters to you, for the sake of someone else. That, Jesus seems to be saying, is the key to fruitful, productive, worthwhile, satisfying, abundant life.

A news item the other day spoke of how the economy is 'slowing down'.

There have been some successive quarters where things haven't grown so much as hoped. Now there is low unemployment which is meant to make things better- but getting people into work doesn't mean they are instantly going to produce plenty; lower fuel costs were mentioned – meant to make people feel they can spend more on other things- but perhaps they have been saving for themselves. So the overall picture isn't as productive as people would like. We've been too careful, apparently so we're all still struggling!

Translate that to the Bible and perhaps it's like saying we can feel safe but feeling safe isn't the end of the story. When Jesus says 'remain in me/abide in me' it's not just for our own comfort, to stay safe with him. It's a call to be fruitful for others, to get our sleeves rolled up in self-sacrifice which is so remarkable that it would have a lasting impact – '*fruit that will last*' (v.16)

PROTECTION

But lest we feel it's just a hard command – obey, produce, sacrifice – then let's hear the words of protection as well. We want to feel and to know we are safe. It's a human instinct. So those people in Isaiah's day knew – *revive us and restore us and we will call on your name*. Jesus knows it. So he says: *Abide, remain in me....as the father has loved me, so have I loved you* (v.9) *I have called you friends* (v.15) *I chose you* (v.16).

Remember that these words about vines were spoken just before Jesus was arrested. He had predicted his arrest and his death. He could have turned in on himself now but to bear fruit means to turn to others.

He's spoken about their need of the Holy Spirit to help them pray, understand, remember, and he's encouraging them to believe that grief will turn to joy. In the middle of it all he speaks about staying right with him, for their own safety and for the benefit of the world. You can't do it on your own. Stay with me. We also need to pray for the Holy Spirit, to pray, to try to understand his Word, to meet together so we're not like a single branch that's disconnected. Then love and you'll bear fruit -the fruit of the character

of Christ perhaps (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control* – Gal. 5:22)

Some of you will have seen the news on Thursday which showed pictures of a 15 year old boy being pulled alive from the wreckage of a collapsed building 5 days after the earthquake in Nepal. When this one boy came out alive people cheered and hoisted the lead rescuer on their shoulders. It wasn't an act of triumph. There was devastation – in the real sense of the word- all round and 6000 were thought to be dead. Why does the earth quake and split? We don't know. But the instinct to protect and to rescue and to save is so very strong and this was good news in the midst of terrible news.

In the hours before death, Jesus wants to urge his disciples to keep on aiming for faithful lives that trust in his rescue. Be like a fruitful vine, show love and justice; stay with me for protection and you will produce a life of good things for others and satisfaction and purpose for yourselves. Productivity and protection in him, always.

Hilary Edgerton – 3.5.15