

Reflection for Oxford Methodist Circuit Online Service – Sunday 2nd May 2021

Readings: 1 John 4: 7-21 and John 15:1-8

When I was young, I always looked forward to going to the home of much-loved family friends who lived in an enormous Victorian house with out-buildings, sheds and a greenhouse. They ran this property for many years as a Christian guesthouse. It had a grand staircase which my sister and I used to play princesses on, practising our most regal waves and pretending we were wearing beautiful long dresses. This continued into our teenage years. The house was a children's paradise with creepy corridors full of portraits, an enormous kitchen, numerous staircases, a library and lots of nooks and crannies to play hide and seek in!

I remember one day playing with my sister outside and we ventured into the greenhouse. A large Victorian affair which had seen better days, the paint was peeling and cracked. It felt a little dilapidated. But we loved it. I remember being mesmerised by what I now know was a vine. It looked ancient and gnarled, almost prehistoric, but every time we visited there would be new foliage on the vine, green shoots beginning to sprout, fruit beginning to be produced, tender new life from something that looked dry, dead and lifeless was still springing forth. This image is conjured for me whenever I read Jesus' words 'I am the vine and you are the branches'. I picture that knobbly plant snaking through the greenhouse.

We know from our experience of reading, hearing and engaging with scripture that Jesus was a wonderful storyteller. He was able to conjure those visual images which his listeners would understand. His teaching and conversation often enriched by images drawn from the everyday world that was the context for his ministry. His word pictures remain wonderfully evocative and vibrant for today too.

The vine that Jesus describes in the account from John's Gospel is a glorious image of remaining rooted in God. The new branches are part of the one vine and share its DNA. There is no dualism or separation in what Jesus says here, just an intimate oneness of being and purpose. An invitation to find our rooting, our light, our sustenance, our warmth, our

meaning in the intimate embrace of God, within the vine. The continuing life of that seemingly lifeless old vine I described to you is a helpful image for me of what remaining rooted in God can bring. When Jesus is present in our lives and in our communities and in our Church, looked for and longed for, this abundant new life is what we should always hope to see, life springing forth even from the throes of death. In this Easter season we continue to inhabit the reality of resurrection. Even on Holy Saturday where all seemed hopeless and lost, God was at work. New life springs forth as it did from that seemingly lifeless vine in a greenhouse.

Perhaps that old greenhouse could even be a metaphor for the Church. Appearances can be very deceptive. I wish I had a picture of that greenhouse; it must have been a magnificent site when it was built but it was becoming shabby looking. Yet the glass was all still clear and in place. It may have seemed on the verge of being dilapidated and forgotten but one look inside revealed that it was full of life. Maybe that is how we as the Church are perceived today by those outside or even those inside? We often think of our former glory, but I believe the vine is still flourishing, new seeds have germinated, and seedlings are waiting to spring forth. Despite appearances to the contrary and a feeling of being embattled sometimes, there is growth when we remain rooted in the vine of the love of God. Sometimes we might feel more like a gnarled and slightly dilapidated branch, but when we abide in Jesus, there is always hope, there is always love and always opportunities for green shoots to break forth. We lament the fact that our churches are no longer full, but I believe without question where our spiritual lives are flourishing abundantly on the vine, the life of the church can flourish too. It may not be in ways we expect, or even in ways that we would choose or are comfortable with, but through that intimate relationship with the vine, new life is possible. And where new life in Jesus is longed for and looked for, the green shoots of foliage are becoming apparent. Where love is at the heart of all we are as church, all we are as the community of Christ on our streets and in our workplaces, green shoots can appear. Where God's love, articulated so beautifully in 1 John, inspires our action, our call for a fairer and more just world, green shoots can appear. As we love one another, maybe especially those we find most difficult to love, God's love is embodied in us and green shoots can appear. For God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love for perfect love casts out fear. We love because God

first loved us. Grafted into the vine we are a community of love and called to share that love. One of my heroines of the faith, St Teresa of Avila wrote these famous and beautiful words 'Christ has no body now but yours; no hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on the world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.' How do we respond as a beloved 'vine' community of Christ to this call to service?

My prayer for our church communities throughout this Circuit, our Connexion and the universal church is that we may remain firmly rooted in the vine and not give ourselves up as gnarled and wizened. Instead I pray that we might be inspired by the Spirit to seek and work for growth. May we be greenhouses of faith, providing warmth and nourishment for growth together, nurturing love that overflows into our communities and our world. Love that is untamed, unbounded, inclusive, generous and justice-seeking. For love is from God and God is love. May God's perfect love cast out our fear as we go out to serve, to love and be loved. Amen.