

PENTECOST 3

"IT IS TO THE GLORY OF MY FATHER THAT YOU SHOULD BEAR MUCH FRUIT" (JOHN 15:8).

In the Old Testament the people of God were often described as a vine. In psalm 80 for example, the writer states "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt, thou didst drive out nations and plant it; thou didst clear the ground before it, so that it made good roots and filled the land".

A vine is, as you probably know, a trailing shrub producing grapes. For the people of Israel, the vine is one of the most important of all fruit-crops. When they were planning to invade Palestine, Moses' spies brought back huge clusters of grapes as a sign of the richness of the Promised Land. Vines were planted in rows in carefully prepared vineyards on the sunny hill slopes. Each spring the vines were pruned, and as the grapes ripened the owner kept a sharp look-out for intruders - animal or human - from a special watch-tower. At harvest time the grapes were picked and taken to be trodden out at the wine-press. . The fermenting wine was stored in new skins or pottery jars to mature. The vine was a national emblem in Israel, a symbol of peace and prosperity.

In the gospel reading for today, Jesus described himself as the true vine on which the branches (his followers) depend. It is difficult to imagine the impact on the people which those words would have had - "I am the vine - you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing. " It is a staggering

claim. His hearers would either accuse him of blasphemy or they would accept his claim. There was no compromise. And yet, as a faithful Jew, Jesus was only really stating the obvious truth that as a descendent of Abraham, he and all the people of Israel were called to be a fruitful vine. Their divine commission was to be the people of God who were to transform the world into a place of peace and prosperity. They had been called by God to bring into being the kingdom of peace, justice and truth. Their whole history, recorded in the pages of the Old Testament, was evidence of this truth. Jesus was simply claiming this truth for himself and at the same time, reminding his followers that they also were part of the same vine. "I am the vine and you are the branches". We have a responsibility before God to be bearers of fruit. The whole story of the Bible, from the call of Abraham - the mission of Moses to lead the people out of slavery into the promised land - the teaching of the prophets - the exile in Babylon and the subsequent return, all this finds its climax and fulfilment in the coming of the Messiah Jesus and his death and resurrection.

It was the death and resurrection of Jesus which gave rise to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which made it possible for people of God to be the "Body of Christ". When we say in the Eucharist, "We are the Body of Christ" we are making the same claim. We are the New Israel - we are the vine - it all amounts to the same thing. We are called by God through our Baptism to be the Church - the Body of Christ, and when we say those words we too are to be judged as either guilty of blasphemy or the words are true. God himself be our judge. For as long as we

remain in Christ we will bear fruit. If we do not remain in Christ we are to be like the branch that has been cut off and thrown away.

We are called, not to be supporters of a holy club, not to be curators of ancient monuments or preservers of ancient traditions, but to be the vine - the body of Christ - who in continuity with the ancient people of Israel are called to bear fruit - fruit which will last. WE ARE NOT CALLED TO GO TO CHURCH, WE ARE CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH. The fruit that we bear is the fruit of the Holy Spirit - a commodity which is desperately needed in the world today, described by St. Paul as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility and self-control. There is no law against these things, says St. Paul, .

As we share together in the Holy Eucharist this morning let us pray that we will indeed be filled with his grace and heavenly blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN