

Easter 04

‘Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.” John 15:1

The description of Jesus as the true vine, implies that Israel had been an imperfect foreshadowing of what was seen to perfection in Jesus. “I am the true vine”. Jesus is what God had called Israel to be, but what Israel had in fact never become. With Jesus a new Israel is born, the members of which draw their spiritual nourishment from Jesus alone. Believers in Jesus are ‘limbs’ of his body, and share in the life which results from the sacrifice of his body on the cross; a truth which was underlined in the words ‘Except you eat the flesh of the son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you’. The same truth is now emphasised in the metaphor of the vine. We are brought into the closest union with our Lord, as Jesus had indicated very clearly to his disciples when he invited us to drink the outpoured wine, which represented his blood, which was shed for our redemption. It is most probable that it was after his reference to the ‘fruit of the vine’ at the Last Supper, that Jesus spoke of himself as the true vine.

The relationship of a vine to its branches leaves us under no misapprehension about our need for continual ‘cleansing’ if we are to enjoy the eternal life, which Jesus offers us. This continual cleansing is different from the initial cleansing which we experience in our baptism. The cleansing which we receive at the altar is described in the prayer of humble access:- ‘Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat of the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.’

The branches of a vine are not self centred or independent. They have no source of life within themselves. The fact that they need constantly to be pruned makes it apparent that their life is drawn

neither from a source outside themselves, nor from themselves in isolation, but from the stem of the vine to which they belong. The people of Israel spoke of pruning as ‘cleansing’ of the branches, just as we speak of the cleansing of the land.

When we are unwilling, through a proud sense of our own self-sufficiency, to draw spiritual strength from Jesus, we become like a dead branch which is unable to bear fruit.

In the closing verses of the gospel Jesus reminds us of the dignity and the joy of our vocation to be the children of God. We are the chosen servants of one whose destiny it was to lay down his life for his friends. Hence our love for one another must also be a sacrificial love. But the practice of that love is never without joy and fulfilment. Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, and part of that joy lay in the knowledge that his disciples, in obeying the commands he had given them, would find in their obedience the fullness of their own joy.

We are sent out, as the early disciples were sent out, into the world, not under our own steam, as it were, but with the assurance that we have available to us that supernatural strength which was promised to us at Pentecost – the power of the Holy Spirit.

As St. John expressed it in the opening chapter of the Gospel, ‘to those who received him, he gave power to become children of God.’

AMEN.