**Sermon Feb. 5 2023 Abiding and Fruitfulness (the Vine). Jn. 15: 1-17 & 2 Cor. 3: 13-18**

Today, in the fourth of the Series from John 13-17 we are looking at Abiding and Fruitfulness, though I will deal with fruitfulness in the vine first. I wonder if you have had any experience with growing a grape vine. I have had two-each uniformly unsuccessful! At Shalstone the vine grew in the porch and got mildew! In Buckingham the fruit was tiny, sour and tough skinned. Here Jesus, successfully, uses the picture of the vine in His discourse at the Last Supper to build up and strengthen the disciples, when, after three years of close contact, they would no longer have His physical presence following the Crucifixion. Tony spoke on Jn. 14:1-14, where Jesus wanted to reassure the disciples that after their death He would join them “in His Father’s house (where) there were many mansions…” Paul Mileham spoke about the Holy Spirit as Counsellor or Advocate, who would come along side them to support them in the rough and tumble of life. Last Sunday, Paul Woods showed how the Holy Spirit would not only convict “the world (those who do not recognise Jesus as God) of sin, righteousness and judgement” but also help to bring the Fruits of the spirit to the disciples.

The picture of the Vine and Abiding shows the need to stick close to Jesus Christ despite His physical absence, as does “reflecting God’s glory” in the second reading. The Vine is seen as a unit with stem, leaves and flowers etc. It is SO reassuring for the believer that He says “I am the vine and you are the branches.”Jn. 15:5. This is true whatever we are feeling like. A believer is one who has opened their heart to the Lord. Sometimes, like with Billy Graham, that came at a definite moment. Sometimes not-if you had asked his wife one month whether she had asked Jesus into her life, she would have not been sure, whereas a year later she would have had no doubt that He was in her heart. Then, there is further reassurance that He promises “I will remain in you” Jn. 15: 4. This echoes “Him that comes to Me I will never drive out.” Jn. 6: 37. Again, He says “You did not chose Me, but I chose you…” Jn. 15: 16-even if we think we have chosen Him-somehow He got there first. We can be secure that He is the vine and we are the branches-part of Him.

The vine’s function is to bear fruit-not to be static or merely decorative “…every branch that does bear fruit (the gardener-the Father) prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” Jn.15:2. What is the fruit? It is love, for He says “Love each other, as I have loved you.” Jn. 15: 12. Moreover, “This is my command : Love each other.” Jn. 15: 17. What a challenge! We are potentially so unloving as human beings. Juliet often said-put a nice, kind and thoughtful man behind the wheel of a car and he becomes like Jehu driving furiously with total disregard for other road users-worse than Mr Toad. This love is not to be a flash in the pan either-“I appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last.” Jn. 15: 16.

What is the aim or destiny of the fruit? The Father’s glory. “This is to my Father’s glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” Jn. 15: 8. This is an exciting challenge to be part of the witness to the world of the Father’s character. “Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify you Father in heaven” Matt. 5: 16. It’s so tempting and easy to do things for our own glory, self esteem or street creds. Nonetheless, it is wonderful that any fruit of love we show as individuals or a church family could help someone to see the goodness and love of God.

To grow this love needs pruning and remaining in Him. The branch “that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” Jn. 15: 2. Firstly the pruning may take the form of disappointment, being brought up short in some way or convicted about some wrong action. This is never pleasant, but it should lead to greater trust in, or thankfulness to the Lord for some experience of His support, so that we are better people thereafter. Secondly,, we need to remain attached to the stem or close to Jesus for His help. “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.” Jn. 15: 4. He provides the nutrients or food, as it were for the fruits of the spirit to grow in us. Like a spray of budding sweet peas in a vase-they may develop flowers but never the pod of peas.

This answers the question of how to maintain our commitment. “Now remain in my love.” Jn. 15: 9. What exactly does this mean? Take up His offer of pardon, peace and acceptance given in His love, which, also, involves His friendship. “I no longer call you servants..Instead, I have called you friends.“ Jn. 15: 15. “You are my friends, if you do what I command.” Jn. 15: 14. This was what bowled me over when I opened my heart to Him even though it meant, I had to obey His commands. There was a condition-“If you remain in Me and my words remain in you..” Jn. 15: 7. His words in the Scriptures reveal Him to us, so we need to read them-perhaps, this Lent there is a Bible Study to join, or read a few verses regularly, following the BRF or Scripture Union notes. This will help us to remain in Him and strengthen our friendship with Him or, to put it another way, to practise the presence of God. A 17th century French monk, Brother Lawrence, wrote a short book with this title. He was a cook or bottle washer in the kitchen. Without spending all his time in supplication, he would recall God’s presence during his dreary jobs, recalling “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord…” Col. 3: 23. This is a way to remain in His Love.

The same point is made in 2 Cor. 3: 13-18 using a different picture. Moses was with the Lord, while getting the 10 Commandments. When he emerged his face reflected the brightness of God’s glory. He wore a veil “to keep the Israelites from gazing at it, while the radiance was fading away.” 2 Cor. 3: 13. Paul explains “..whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil (of incomprehension) is taken away…And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Cor. 3: 17-18. Unlike Moses, the believer, who remains in the Lord’s presence, will not suffer from fading radiance, but will be transformed into His likeness increasingly by the Holy Spirit. What a wonderful reassuring picture!

To sum up for practical application for our lives-if we see ourselves as branches of the Vine, which is Christ, and remain there we will bear fruit. We should pray to remain in His love and friendship, as we obey Him. Thus, we should be transformed increasingly into His likeness of love-the fruit He wants to show.