

Welcome to this mornings Live-streamed worship from Christchurch. My name is Andy Searle, and joining me this morning providing our music are, our reader is Annette England and Tony Edmonds is behind the desk making all the complicated technical stuff possible.

Our reading this morning is one of the I Am statements made by Jesus, I am the true vine. So I invite you to imagine a vine, growing strongly, laden with grapes, bursting with flavours. This picture of fruitfulness that Jesus portrays here illustrates the fruitful lives we can achieve if we are connected to God and allow the Holy Spirit to flow into every part of our lives.

Our opening verse is from Galatians 5 v 22-23.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Song. STF 397. The spirit lives to set us free (Walk in the light)

The Spirit lives to set us free,
Walk, walk in the light;
He binds us all in unity,
Walk, walk in the light.

Chorus

Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.

Verse 2

Jesus promised life to all,
Walk, walk in the light;
The dead were wakened by his call,
Walk, walk in the light.

Verse 3

He died in pain on Calvary,
Walk, walk in the light;
To save the lost like you and me,
Walk, walk in the light.

Verse 4

We know his death was not the end,
Walk, walk in the light;
He gave his Spirit to be our friend,
Walk, walk in the light

Verse 5

By Jesus' love our wounds are healed
Walk, walk in the light
The Father's kindness is revealed
Walk, walk in the light

Verse 6

The Spirit lives in you and me,
Walk, walk in the light;
His light will shine for all to see,
Walk, walk in the light.

Prayer

Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit we come to worship you. You are the God of creation by whom all things have come into being. In the beauty of creation, we wonder at your works, we marvel at the diversity of life in our world. Spring is the season of growth and re-creation sustained by your power and goodness. We thank you for the fruits of creation which you provide for us through the created world.

We are also aware that we take the gift of creation for granted and want to take all we can for ourselves today, with without a care for how this can impact the future of our world. Lord we are truly sorry for our selfishness and lack of care for our environment - help our actions to reflect a greater care for the world you have given to us to provide for us both now and in the future days to come so those who follow us can enjoy the beauty of the world as we can do so today.

God of love,
plant us in the soil of your grace.
Nurture us with the strength of Christ,
the vine of everlasting life.
Enlighten us with the wisdom of your Spirit,
which flows through us today and all days.
Abide in us,
that we may abide in you
and live in your love.
In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Reading: John 15 v 1-8

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Message - Stay connected; Apart from me you can do nothing.

If you are watching this service live or on YouTube sometime after, then you are doing so because you are connected to the internet. And you are probably connected using broadband, and most using a wireless connection. But unless you have a stable and a strong connection, then you may struggle to be able to watch the broadcast. Even if you don't have access to the internet and have received a written version of the service, that was also sent from my computer using the internet.

Furthermore, we couldn't even stream this service without a strong connection to the internet here in Church. Anyone who has been involved in the streamed services over the last 12 months will know that when our connection is poor, then things quickly go wrong. During the last service when I streamed the music from home, 30 seconds before I was due to lead a song, I looked at my screen and it was frozen. My internet had decided to disconnect me - I had to wait and reconnect before I could lead the song. And there have been many examples of these things but we keep going and we have never failed to deliver the service! This just emphasises the importance of staying connected.

The teaching we heard this morning from John 15 where Jesus talks about the true vine is all about being connected to God and how important it is to have a strong and stable connection if we are to flourish in our faith. 'Apart from me, you can do nothing' is a stark reminder about this. Our service to God stems from a life that is founded and rooted in God and if we become cut off, we will stumble and stray and no longer be able to fulfil our purposes. All the devices and computers we use to stream and watch our services need power – if the power is cut, or the battery runs out, we can do nothing.

Any plant or tree, including a vine, needs to be connected to its roots to grow. Cut off a branch and you can usually tell very quickly that it is no longer linked to its roots – the vibrant colours of flowers and leaves will start to fade, and soon will wither and die. I have an ongoing problem with Ivy growing up a fence, so intertwined with the trellis above the fence that it is hard to cut out. To help remove it, I found the stem near the ground and cut it at that point – the task to remove it will now be much easier soon because the stems will lose all their strength. The connection is broken. This is like the branch that does not remain in Jesus and is thrown away and withers.

So how do we become connected in the first place? Simply put, we begin with what I will call a John 3v 16 moment. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' It begins with that step of faith, to believe in Christ, to believe that he died on the cross to save us from our sins. This is where our connection with God is truly forged, where our life of faith begins with that first simple step. Of course, nothing is that simple – making this connection is the start but keeping that connection strong is the challenge we all face. The first thing I do every morning when I start work is to switch on my computer, then I reconnect it to the internet in order to be able to work. Because every night, the connection is lost when I switch it off. Isn't that just like our relationship with God – on and off – we seek him when we need him but it is so easy to switch it off and do our own thing when we feel like it. Read the book of Judges to see how this became an endless cycle for the Israelites – they would stray then come back to God in despair and be saved, then they would be tempted again by false Gods -again and again and again.

What can we do to stay connected – well things like maintaining the disciplines of prayer, reading the bible, fellowship and worship all strengthen our relationship but allowing the Holy Spirit to grow within us is essential. This is the lifeblood that flows from our roots in God into every part of our lives – providing the nutrients that allow us to flourish and grow. For a plant like the vine, like many plants and trees, its purpose is to bear fruit, the grapes. Seeing the fruit would be sign that the plant is healthy and well fed with nutrients and water. Paul of course, articulated the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as bearing fruit in Galatians 5. The fruit of the Spirit. We can think of the fruit as the outward signs of the connection we have with God through the spirit, in the same way that a plant or tree's fruit is a sign that it is connected to its roots. Jesus said, if you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.

When we moved to our current house, we inherited a grape vine planted just outside our patio doors. And every year it would grow, and grow, and just keep on growing, throwing out new vines that spread in every direction. To keep it under control, it needed to be pruned regularly, otherwise it shut out most of the light coming through the windows. It did produce some fruit although very small and bitter but the birds loved them. Jesus describes the pruning that God carries out in order to make the vines more fruitful. Note that he doesn't prune in order to make the vine fruitful, he takes the branch already bearing fruit and prunes to make it even more fruitful. This is God's work so we need to be willing to let him prune us. This might not be easy for us because the implication is that it will involve sacrifice on our part – we may need to lose something, give up something in order to bear more fruit in the long term. It is also implied that pruning is something that God will do when we become more mature in our faith – we need to be sufficiently connected to be bearing some fruit before this work can take place. Sometimes we can be tempted to spread ourselves too thin, do many things but only moderately well, but God can help to find the one thing that we can do brilliantly for him.

Jesus said the bearing of fruit is the outward sign that we are his disciples, that we remain in him and we are connected to him. The image of the vine, being pruned and bearing fruit is very simple and yet very powerful because I think it is something we can all relate to. To consider that everything we do outwardly as Christians is only possible because of the strength of the inner relationship we have with God through Christ. All we do in his name stems from the strength of that connection which we need to maintain.

Being in the presence of God makes that connection real. Our next song simply states our desire to spend time in his presence and to cherish that precious time – as we hear or sing the words, let us pray that we will experience God and know that he is close.

Song. To be in your presence

To be in your presence
To sit at your feet
When your love surrounds me
And makes me complete

This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire
This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire

To rest in your presence
Not rushing away
To cherish each moment
Here I would stay

This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire
This is my desire, o Lord
This is my desire

Prayer. Using STF 587 v2 as a refrain

I am the vine, the living vine
Apart from me you can do nothing

I am the vine, the true vine
Abide in me and I in you

We pray that we can strive to stay strongly connected to you today and in all the days to come. Help us to allow your Spirit to flow into every part of our lives, leaving no part untouched, so we can bear the fruit that demonstrates the depth of our faith in you. And may we allow you to prune away the parts of our lives that prevent us from reaching our full potential, and achieve the purposes that are only possible if we remain strongly rooted in you.

I am the vine, the living vine
Apart from me you can do nothing
I am the vine, the true vine
Abide in me and I in you

As we turn to think about the wider world in which we live, we remember the terrible toll that Covid is taking across India. Just as we are able to do more here, we are reminded of the devastating impact this virus can still exert across our world. It is easy to see the images of what is happening in India and feel helpless, but we pray that countries that are able to, can share the equipment, the medicines and the vaccines desperately needed to alleviate the suffering there. And help us not to forget those who are in greater need when we are so fortunate to have access to the healthcare and support in this country.

I am the vine, the living vine
Apart from me you can do nothing
I am the vine, the true vine
Abide in me and I in you

Lord, help us to be fruitful in our lives, to show through our words and our actions, that the Holy Spirit is living and active in us. May our actions truly make a difference, being like salt and like light in the world. Help us to see others in need around us and to seize the opportunity to be like Christ to them. We take a moment of silence to remember anyone known to us in need of our prayers today. Father, for those we have named and thought of, touch them with your power, your healing and your peace today.

I am the vine, the living vine
Apart from me you can do nothing
I am the vine, the true vine
Abide in me and I in you

The Lord's prayer – Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Blessing

Song. STF 385 Holy Spirit we welcome you

Holy Spirit, We Welcome You
Holy Spirit, We Welcome You

Move Amongst Us With Holy Fire
As We Lay Aside All Earthly Desire
Hands Reach Out And Our Hearts Aspire
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit We Welcome You.

Holy Spirit, We Welcome You
Holy Spirit, We Welcome You
Let The Breeze Of Your Presence Blow
That Your Children Here Might Truly Know
How To Move In The Spirit's Flow
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit We Welcome You.

Holy Spirit, We Welcome You
Holy Spirit, We Welcome You
Please Accomplish In Me Today
Some New Work Of Loving Grace I Pray
Unreservedly Have Your Way
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit We Welcome You.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit We Welcome You.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit We Welcome You