

The Tangled Vine

Keble College, Oxford

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8. 26–40, John 15.1–8

‘Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down to Gaza” [...] So he got up and went.’ (Acts 8.26)

I think it’s fair to say that our readings, and especially the first reading from Acts, would make any politician facing an election ballot at the moment rather uncomfortable. Here we have a highly-ranked and respected Apostle. He’s from the first group selected by the Church to be ordained as deacon. He’s a ground-breaker and trend-setter; he’s serving the people. He’s converted thousands; he’s healed the sick: his resumé is awesome. And then the angel of the Lord sends him away from the capital city, down an obsolete and rather dangerous road to Gaza. And to make matters worse, on the road that takes him away from being front and centre, the Spirit of the Lord sends him to talk to an Ethiopian eunuch, a potentially transgendered foreigner who is in his constituency. And they are in the middle of the desert, without a witness or a journalist to record the encounter. Here, God orchestrates the most unlikely of relationships that the *status quo* doesn’t permit, but it’s one which leads to the transformation of both a marginalized individual and this up-and-coming deacon.

But it’s not just them. These readings this evening don’t sit well with us either: readings about angels and spirits telling people where to go and language of pruning and cutting off. And one of

the most uncomfortable themes that runs through all the readings is a distinctive lack of human agency.

The angel of the Lord says to Philip, ‘go, go down that obsolete and possibly dangerous road without an end in sight’. And how can you say no to an angel? The spirit of the Lord tells him to speak to the foreigner in the chariot, and, in the heat of the day on said road, he has no choice but to climb in. And then Jesus tells us, I am the vine, *you* are the branches, God is the gardener. Which is all well and good, unless I want to be a tulip or a sunflower. Then what? It’s all rather unsatisfactory.

But let’s grant, for a moment, the possibility that this gospel might have something to say to us. That this imagery of a vine and branches – even if we’d prefer to be our own kind of flower – might apply to our lives. And the not so obvious question is this: if we are stuck as a branch, what kind of branch are you? Now I don’t mean are you leafy or fruity or thorny, but think for a moment about a vine and its branches.

Are you the branch who just goes for it, doesn’t worry about the other branches, and grows straight out to the side, flourishing and blossoming and doing our own thing until at some point, inevitably, we bend, and even break under the stress of not having much support? Are you the branch that immediately reaches out and grasps onto other branches, pretty sure that you can’t grow alone? Are you the branch who is strong enough to allow others to grasp onto you, offering support to those that are weaker and less confident? Are you the branch that stages a coup and takes over all the other branches, grabbing onto any that get in your way and overpowering them

with your leaves and your magnificence? Are you the branch that hasn't grown quite yet, for fear of venturing out and showing your true leaves and fruits?

Perhaps there is more choice in how we engage and identify ourselves as branches. For while it doesn't feel like there's a lot of human agency – there simply isn't room in this particular image for sunflowers and daisies – the point isn't about individuality and self-justification but is entirely about community. A community where we begin from a common base – God – a community where we begin with a common vine – Christ – a community where we know that even when we are pruned and life gets hard and uncertain and doesn't go the way we hoped, we are still a part of something bigger.

Moreover, the thing we forget about vines and branches is that they are intertwined: tangled and messy. While we want to be distinct and make sure that, if we have to be a branch, at least we get credit for the fruit we bear, the reality is that our lives are uncomfortably tangled up together. And this is good news, for whether we are in the midst of a moment where we are bearing abundant fruit and really flourishing in our work, our studies, our relationships, whatever it might be; or whether we are in the midst of a moment where we feel a bit cut off, uncertain, unclear about how we fit into the bigger picture, there is a place for all of us on this so-called vine. For this is community. This is Christian community. Although we live in a world that promises we can do all things by our self, we are reminded in this image, we are reminded by Jesus, that we are dependent on God and on one another. And what a gift that reminder is.

God calls us into community, and like the call of Philip down that road to Gaza and into that

chariot with a stranger, we never know exactly what form this will take. Sometimes we will be the loners; sometimes we will be the ones holding up others; sometimes we will be the ones overwhelmed by all the other branches; sometimes we will need a little pruning in order to regroup and re-gather when we break. It's a risky business, this matter of being a branchy community, because it calls us to realize that there is more to this world than our needs and our difficulties: be it an earthquake in Nepal, acts of terror in the Middle East, remembrance of wars past, or acts of violence that call us to respond within our own community. It calls us to shift our perspective to realize we are part of something bigger, messier, and ever changing. And it calls us to be open to God and the way we might be surprised along the way, when we find ourselves on a different road than we thought we'd be on, or with an unexpected companion, or in an unexpected conversation.

And yet, perhaps especially at *this* time in a world with *these* challenges, these texts are exactly what we need. It's no mistake that the word Jesus uses to describe the relationship between the vine and the many different and disparate branches is 'abide.' A word that has to do with persevering, with persistence, with stamina, with continuing. It's a word we all need this term to give us perspective. Christ calls us, calls you and calls me, to abide. 'Abide in me and I in you,' Jesus says (Jn 15.4). As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. Abiding in Christ has everything to do with being part of community, being part of the vine, and of upholding one another, of sitting alongside another in times of flourishing and times of brokenness. And of trusting that when we do this, we are not alone. When we are in trouble, abide. When we are stuck or worried or overwhelmed, abide. When we are at the top of our game and at full strength, abide. For whether on a desert road or

on a mountaintop, we are called out of ourselves into community. We are called out of ourselves to persevere, to keep plugging away, because we never know if someone right next to us, someone growing near us might need the support, the strength, the love we might be able to provide when we are enmeshed in community, when we abide and don't give up on the sustaining and unconditional love of God in Christ.

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