

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Sunday 17th May 2020 – “*Remain in the vine*”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this Podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church. Once again, I want to thank those of you who have been listening to these podcasts week by week for your kind words of support and appreciation.

There are two other ways, apart from listening to these podcasts on the internet, that folk have also been able to share in worship with us. One is through reading the printed script which we are emailing out and even printing out for several of our members on a weekly basis. You can also find the printed script for all these podcasts on the Chalmers Memorial Church Website - www.chalmerschurch.co.uk – and look for the **Services** tab at the top of the page where you can download these words.

In more recent weeks we have also introduced a way of listening to this podcast via telephone which ideally suits those who do not have internet access.

We have all had to adapt so quickly, in recent weeks, to the various ways in which we now communicate with each other. Before this lockdown I had never even heard of the video conference program, Zoom and had never taken part in any web-based meeting... Now, however, I have an account of my own!

Even how to get this podcast on the internet seemed like a technical stretch too far! Nothing ventured, though – nothing gained!

Technology has genuinely helped many of us to keep in touch, to remain connected and for that we are grateful.

Thinking of togetherness our reading this week, comes from the 15th chapter of John’s gospel in which Jesus emphasises how interconnected and intertwined we really are with each other and with our heavenly Father. We are he says, like branches on a vine which is tended by God himself.

It is, as we’ll discover later, a powerful image at several different levels. How, after all, can we stay together when it is so hard to actually be together? I believe that Jesus words have something to say to our current way of living and the way that, in the strangest of ways, the seeming distance we are currently observing seems to be having the effect of actually drawing us more closely together.

More of that later, however. First of all, though, shall we pray? Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

Our loving Heavenly Father, once again we approach you from the quietness and security of our own homes seeking, at this time, to remain connected – one with another but most especially with you. Outside of the familiarity of our usual places of worship it certainly feels strange to be worshipping in this way but, as the weeks progress, we draw strength from the promise that you – through your Holy Spirit – remain with us at all times.

We thank you that through Jesus we are bound together as your people. We thank that we need never feel isolated and left out because Jesus has drawn us closer to you.

As we settle for these few moments, we ask that once again you would connect us together. Help us to bring to mind those who are sharing these words along with us. Lift us up by the faith that unites us.

Father forgive us, we pray, if we forget our interconnectedness to each other.

Forgive us if we have seen ourselves as independent branches on the vine that is Jesus, your Son.

Forgive us if we have imagined that we had all the answers that were needed for daily living, as well as for the world of eternity, but have forgotten to place Jesus, the vine, and you the gardener, at the heart of our thoughts.

Instead renew us, we pray, so that today we may learn what it means to depend upon a loving Heavenly Father who cares for his people just like the vineyard worker tends to the vines in their care – using wisdom, experience and understanding to remove that which should not be there so that ripe fruits may grow and flourish.

And so, loving and tending God, hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – John chapter 15 verses 1 to 10

The vine and the branches

(Jesus said) '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 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.

9 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

After 14 previous series it was time, I suppose, for Lord Sugar – famed for the BBC's Apprentice – to shake things up again. There he was, at the start of the last years series – series 15, looking for some eager and success hungry individuals who could make it in the world of business. But then again, he knew that we'd just about seen it all before. As I say, time for a shake up which came in the very first week when he sent all the budding Apprentice's to Cape Town in South Africa.

The task was to run either a day's Safari in the Jungle or a guided tour of a high end vineyard. The latter task fell to the girl's team whilst the boys went for the Safari option.

But first to sell the tickets for the tours – a task made harder when the price you want to charge way exceeds what the average tourist could get from almost any other company doing the same tour. Half empty tour buses – not such a good start!

Ahh – but it could still be redeemed... so long as the guided tours were outstanding, that is...!

But, when the boys promise lots of sightings of wild animals but get hardly any, and the girls promise a wine tasting tour and manage to get lost in the building they are touring because no one has a map – well perhaps not on this occasion...!!!

And there was precious little information on how the actual wine was produced starting with the grapes from which they were grown and the vines from which they grew. Just in case you are wondering – the girls won, but not by much. Lord Sugar was not happy!

Now, whilst most of us would struggle with taking such guided tours we probably understand enough about the process of how products like wine are produced to know that the skills involved are pretty considerable.

I mean, you've got to know about the ground in which the vines grow... some vines don't like certain sorts of soil... and some grapes need exactly the right amount of watering and sunlight. And when a vine gets all misshapen and tangled up you've got to know how to tidy it up to make the rest of the vine grow even more strongly... and that's even before you make the decision to start harvesting the fruit and preparing it for a period of maturing in cask and then bottle.

There is a real science behind it all that takes years to learn and, when science has played its part, having a good sense of taste, as well as an ability to detect subtle flavours, also comes to the fore.

The people of Israel would have, we can only presume, understood this all too well. As William Barclay describes it in his commentary on John's gospel, vines were found all over the area of Palestine where Jesus lived. They weren't quite planted in the neat rows of the vineyards attached to your average French Chateaux but there was, nevertheless, a certain order to them.

Some of the vines crept along the ground... some were propped up on stilt like structures and others were made to grow through trellis.

However they were kept, the vineyard workers knew how to tend the vines which meant that as well as nurturing the parts of the vine that grew well that they also knew how to get rid of the bits that didn't grow at all... the bits of the vine that produced no fruit simply being discarded, tossed away and eventually making their way onto a bonfire where they are reduced to nothing more than mere ashes.

So far, so good then... except that Jesus begins to turn this quite simple image of the vineyard worker tending to the vines into a serious lesson to his followers about the nature of their relationship with him.

Let me explain...

If they had been listening to what he was saying, they would already have known that Jesus was drawing upon a rich biblical history of Israel being compared to a vineyard.

The prophet Isaiah – for example - compares them, at Isaiah chapter 5, to a vineyard in what has become known as the "*Song of the Vineyard*". From the outset its language is full of pastoral imagery...

Here's how Isaiah begins his words...

"I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well". (Isaiah 5 vv 1,2)

However, just as the song begins to luxuriate in the nature of God's love for the Vineyard, the prophet bursts that particular metaphorical balloon with the needle like words, "*Then he (God) looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit*"

What began as a love song now begins to turn into a lament. Why, when so much effort has been poured into tending the vineyard did the crops then fail?

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah uses the same image in his words about the people of God. At Jeremiah chapter 2 and verse 21 we read - "*I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?*"

There's a sort of pattern emerging here, isn't there...? It's not that the metaphorical vines have been planted in the wrong place... No - they've been given every advantage that they need. It is just that something along the way has left the vines floundering... wasting away...

When the vines needed tending, they have been left to simply grow...

When they should have been trimmed back to make way for new growth, the old unproductive elements have been left meaning that the vines, which do not grow fruit, are still drawing from the nutrition that runs from the roots through the vines themselves.

You don't need to have watched Beechgrove Garden, Alan Titchmarsh or Monty Don all that many times to know that sometimes to allow new growth to begin that there has got to be pruning...

Not that my own wife is ever so keen to hand me the secateurs in our own gardening endeavours due to my tendency, mainly, to destroy plants by over pruning them... or even mistaking

altogether which is a plant that we wanted to save rather than uproot...! She's never forgiven me for the damage I did to a climbing honeysuckle a few years back!

But at least I know the theory... and I know someone who is better at doing these sorts of things than me... which is, of course, just the point that Jesus is making here.

Right back at verse 1 of our reading, Jesus makes it perfectly clear that it is not we who have been allocated the role of chief gardener. Rather, Jesus says, "*I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener*" before going on to explain that one of the things his heavenly Father does, from time to time, is to make sure that the vine – of which his followers are part – is kept in the best condition... which can sometimes mean a seemingly brutal process of pruning...

As the disciples hear these words, the events of the cross are getting ever closer. At the end of John chapter 14 we read the simple phrase spoken by Jesus, "*Come now; let us leave*" which indicates that Jesus has now taken his followers beyond the confines of the upper room, presumably to the Mount of Olives where in a garden called Gethsemane – surrounded by luxurious Olive Trees – he urges them to remain one with him and the Father.

The imagery here, points out one preacher on this subject, is particularly powerful. Normally, he suggests, we see the process of belonging to something as being all about the choices we make... the act of choosing which things we will associate with... which groups we will sign up on the dotted line to... which churches we will go to... which bowling club we will pay our fees too... and so and so forth.

Not here however because, as the American writer and theologian Eugene Petersen puts it, saying, "*I am a member of whatever church we are part of*" is (biblically speaking) like referring to your own hand as a mere member of your body. Which is powerful stuff because it's not as if our hand chose one day to join our particular body... The different parts of our bodies – whatever form or shape they take – sort of came as a job lot... Somehow, the package came complete...

In the same way, Jesus says, if you don't stay in the proverbial vine it's sort of like choosing to remove something that, in ideal circumstances, we wouldn't normally choose to remove...

It's this notion that Jesus uses to express just how closely bound we are together – with him, with our Heavenly Father and, of course, with each other – and that is something in recent weeks we have learnt about in abundance.

If we are learning anything in these days, it is that life is made infinitely more meaningful, and our faith more powerful, when we see living as a team task rather than a solo expedition...

And so we are learning, if we didn't do so before, to speak to neighbours when hitherto we didn't even know their names... and we clap for carers that we've never met and are never likely to meet... and contribute donations to groups that are doing the sort of work that we'd dearly love to do, if only we were allowed out there in the midst of it all.

And we are learning that faith built vines creep around the streets and roads of our communities binding disparate folk together in prayer... in telephone calls... in Facetime and Zoom... in emails and texts... even a wave from a window, helping us to stay part of the vine - just as Jesus asked his disciples, and each of us, to do. ***Let us pray.***

Closing Prayer

And during our prayers at this time we are going to remember that this would have been the week that the now cancelled Church of Scotland General Assembly would normally

have taken place. We will pray for our Church and also for the new Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland – Rev Dr Martin Fair.

Lord, as we have been thinking about our belonging to the vine that is Jesus, we are reminded once again that we are part of something bigger, something which unites us with other people of faith – part of your Church established on earth so that all who seek to follow Jesus might find encouragement and strength through the support of others.

At this time, we are especially thankful for the fellowship that we are finding with our fellow travellers in faith. We thank you for those who have taken time to pick up phones or drop an email or even put a note through the door for, it is in those ways, that we know we are part of Christ's body.

This week we remember, in particular, the challenge that lockdown has brought to churches, of all denominations, around the country – affecting the practical work that so many congregations were and are involved in as well the worship which helped our journey of faith and kept us connected to Jesus.

Help us, we pray, to understand our togetherness and to remain as branches on the Vine that is Jesus.

This week too, we remember the work of our National Church in Scotland where so many of the daily routines have been altered but where, behind the scenes, care continues to be shown in the name of Christ.

We give thanks for the leadership and witness over this last year of Colin Sinclair whose year as Moderator of the General Assembly was so suddenly changed with current events. We thank you for the inspiring messages he has shared both daily and weekly in recent weeks which have encouraged so many. We pray now for Martin Fair, whose year as Moderator has been altered even before it has properly begun. As he offers leadership and encouragement grant him the words to say and a faith filled with hope and encouragement so that he will find his own way of serving your church in these days.

And, as we do each week, we pray for those in need... for those who offer care... and even for ourselves...

Hold us together... Unite us in our faith for this we ask, as we bring these our prayers in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

*Let us continue to love one another,
because love comes from God.*

*Let us proclaim God's salvation to every generation
remaining in Jesus Christ.*

Like branches of a vine, draw your life from him.

And may God the vine grower tend you and make you fruitful;

May Christ Jesus abide in you giving new life.

And may the Holy Spirit continue to draw each one of us together in unity

This day and forevermore, Amen.