



# Abide & Bear Fruit for the World

Kathleen Rushton reflects on the image of the vine and the branches in John 15:1-17.

JOHN'S GOSPEL IS a web of relationships. Prominent in the story is the relationship of God to Jesus, Jesus to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God to the world, Jesus to disciples, disciples to Jesus, Jesus and disciples to the world, disciples among themselves and the relationships between groups in God's new family. These relationships are expressed in many ways which include "abiding."

## IMAGE OF "ABIDING"

"Abide" (*meneo*) is found 40 times and is translated as stay, continue, remain, endure, live or dwell. The practice of using various words obscures the powerful poetic image of Jesus's invitation to those seeking him (Jn 1:38-39); the relationship of Jesus and the Spirit (Jn 1:32-33); the reciprocal abiding between Jesus and the disciples in the Eucharist (Jn 6:33); the relationship of Jesus and God (Jn 14:10); and the many abodes in God's house (Jn 14:2).

In John 15:1-17, "abide" is found 15 times to suggest that deep, continuous union with Jesus is always present. The earliest Christians would have recognised Jesus's words here as part of a farewell address (Jn 13:31-17:26) which well-known leaders or teachers gave when they knew their death was near. The leader announced his death; expressed concern for the well-being of the group and individuals; stressed that relationships were to continue; and talked about the good things that were to happen as well as the hard times ahead.

## VINE AND BRANCHES

Previously, Jesus had assured his disciples that he would always be present in the community. Now, in the image of the vine and the branches, he tells how this will be so. Jesus begins with "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower" (Jn 15:1) to describe the relationship of

disciples with Jesus and with God (Jn 15:1-11).

## PRUNING

Vine imagery holds together joy and suffering. Of all the plants that provide food, grape vines can grow in adverse places like stony soils and on steep hillsides. Where little else grows, vines are most productive. Natural and living organisms of root and soil interact to produce fruit. This agricultural image of the vine suggests growth, fruitfulness, being itself. Yet, this life-giving image does not bypass suffering and death.

The vine is very much tied to the seasons. Pruning suggests the chill and dying of winter, which looks forward to the new buds of spring and the fruitfulness of late summer and early autumn. When we open ourselves to the love of God in Jesus, when we permit God, the vintner, to prune our lives in order that we might bear fruit, we become free to love

one another. As a vineyard produces good grapes for good wine to bring joy to humanity, so the members of the Church are to love one another, discover true joy and share this with the world.

For Dorothy Lee, “abiding” is “an icon of wholeness and intimacy” which “move[s] through suffering, to accept the reality that life and fecundity come through pain and death, through pruning and the pierced side (Jn 7:38; 19:34). “Abiding,” along with the vine and pruning, offers a language of love (Jn 13:35) which suggests a language of discipleship as a language of fullness. People are like the branches of the vine, pruned to bear fruit by abiding in the vine.

This differs from the discipleship language of self-sacrifice and self-denial found in the synoptic gospels which requires taking up one’s cross (Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24; Lk 9:23) and which follows Jesus’ prediction of his death. The exhortation for disciples to take up their cross and follow Jesus is not found in John.

### TRELLISING

When pruned, the vines are tied to wires supported by poles spread throughout the vineyard. This wiring structure, called trellising, directs vines in their growth. Trellising is like the structures and rules in a community that guide, support and give stability to the common life. When we live independently without such structures, we easily become hurt and have no direction. We wither and bear no fruit. Vine and branches constitute a group of friends. Disciples are friends of Jesus, not slaves (Jn 15.13–14).

“Abiding” suggests a community of interrelationship, mutuality and indwelling. It expresses Jesus’s relationship to God (Jn 15:10), Jesus’s relationship to the community (15:4,9) and the community’s relationship to Jesus (15:1,7).

### JUSTICE FOR ALL

This viticulture image conveys the biblical hope of transformation

through justice for all. The neglect of the poor affects the whole vineyard. God, Isaiah warns, “enters into judgement with the elders and princes ... you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil [Hebrew



“stolen things”] of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Is 3:14–15). God’s vineyard will only flourish if the powerful and strong stop exploiting the poor and vulnerable.

The image of the vine declares that wars will cease. Soldiers are to “beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” The Hebrew word for the latter refers to the knife a vintner used to prune vines. People “shall all sit under their own vines ... and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4.3–4).

Reading for Fifth & Sixth Sundays of Easter 6 & 13 May – John 15:1–17

P24: *Allegory of March: Pruning the Vines* (detail) by Francesco del Cossa, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons  
P25: Photo by David Kohler on Unsplash

### BRANCHES CONNECTING TOGETHER

Ancient culture was deeply rooted within an agricultural world. The understanding of human flourishing was different from our contemporary focus on maximizing production and profit.

The use of chemicals and fertilisers in growing grapes now often interferes with natural organisms. This can tend towards a posture of working “against” something – against nature, against problems – rather than working as part of creation. For many people, consumerism is like a spirituality that gives a sense of identity, comfort and a brand.

Vines are an interconnected and dynamic reality. The language of viticulture can refresh our Christian imagination and reinvigorate what it means today as we journey together as synodal church. Creation and redemption are intertwined. The vine offers a rich and organic view of the Christian life through a spirituality of joy in the earth and in our senses.

Disciples are to be grounded in God’s economy, which is not based on competition and maximum profit, but on mercy, forgiveness and love. Persons are not autonomous and isolated consumers, but branches connected together and nurtured by Jesus and cared for by the vintner, God. God tends the vineyard by watering, pruning and protecting it day and night (Is 27:2–3) and guiding it to thrive and be fruitful (Hos 14:7), to grow into a fruitful community and a blessing to others (Is 27:2–6). ✦

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