

Remain in me

In our attempt to take Jesus' final words in Matthew's gospel seriously, we have spent a long time looking at the commands he laid on his disciples. These have presented a great challenge. We now reach the good news, which is that we are not setting out on this difficult journey alone. We can recall the scene in *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo is contemplating taking the Ring to Mordor.

"A great dread fell on him... an overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. 'I will take the Ring', he said, 'though I do not know the way.'

Later that day, he heard Gandalf the wizard say 'I think I shall come with you', to his intense delight (J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1954, p284 & 286). This single fact transformed the prospect ahead, even though the dangers and difficulties remained as before.

It is the same for us. In the light of the demands laid upon us, we feel thoroughly inadequate, but with Jesus, the whole situation is changed (Ps 110:7).

Christian tradition is curiously unhelpful here. At Christmas, the major Christian festival in the West, we sing our carols;

"He was little, weak and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew."

When church buildings are at their fullest, we focus on Jesus in his infancy - small and defenceless, and unable to do anything for himself. In contrast, we see ourselves by implication as capable independent beings, able to manage our affairs.

This thinking seems to be back to front. Once we begin to see what disciples are actually called to do, the scene is quite different. How helpless and small we feel when confronted with the task Jesus gave us. Jesus, in contrast, has overcome even death. There is no limit to his power to save (Matt 14:30-31).

John chapter fifteen has much to teach us here. We shall spend the rest of this chapter discussing it. In it, the body of people Jesus came to be lead is compared to a vine, under God's control (v1). The first point made is one of warning. If we are tempted to soft pedal Jesus' commands, and simply not attempt to do what he asks, we will be removed from the vine as non-fruiting branches. The purpose of the vine is to bear fruit; there is no place for unproductive branches (v2).

However, every branch which does bear fruit receives attention. It is pruned. We notice, therefore, that all branches are cut. They are either cut right off, or are cut by being pruned. So pain is guaranteed for all believers.

This is the common experience of those who receive the word of God. It is a sharp sword. Like the surgeon's knife, it cuts in order to heal. This pattern can be seen all through the Bible, but perhaps the person who received most hurt from her involvement with God's word was Mary, Jesus' mother. She was told that in receiving the word of God inside her, quite literally, a sword would pierce her heart (Luke 2:35). This was fulfilled throughout her life, especially when she saw her son die on the cross (John 19:25).

It becomes clear, then, that pain avoidance is not an option for believers. This theme comes out later in the passage, where the disciples are told to love one another (v12). Love is not possible without pain, not only because it opens itself to the possibility of rejection, but also because when the loved one is hurt in any way, the other one suffers too (1 Cor 12:26). Those who wish to avoid pain had better not join at all. But let them count the cost; a life without love is a life of loneliness. Who wants to be out in the dark? Better to accept that the Christian way, which we are embarked on, will bring both pain and joy, as we saw earlier.

In order to bear fruit, believers are to remain in Jesus (v4). This speaks of close joining together, like a branch to the trunk of a vine. We notice that Jesus is not just the trunk; he has

described himself as the whole vine, that is root, trunk, branches and all. He is so committed to this enterprise, so willing to be one with his followers, that he lives in them, and so risks all the hurt and pain he would feel if they let him down. It is not just believers who are called to suffer; Jesus has endured the cross for his followers, and presumably goes on being hurt today by their rejection of his words. It is for us to follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).

In our study, we may have given the impression that fruit-bearing is hard work. But this is not so; to be fruitful, believers are simply to remain in him (v4). This may sound easy, but it deserves careful attention. If remaining in him was automatic once a person had accepted Jesus into their life, then why the instruction to remain in him? These words only make sense if, for all their initial commitment and enthusiasm, believers have a tendency to wander off, like sheep, and become disconnected (Isa 53:6).

Anyone who has tried to follow Christ knows how easy it is to wander off. Indeed, the whole history of the Christian church could be studied by looking at how we have all wandered off, in one direction or another, in different periods. Often, rather than loving one another, Jesus' followers have ended up fighting over the best way to do things that Jesus never asked anyone to do in the first place. It seems that going a different way from Christ is all too easy for believers.

God longs for us to go his way. However, he values human freedom highly. He chooses not to fence us in, like pet rabbits. He does provide a hedge of security to keep wild animals out (Job 1:10), but it is a hedge that sheep can escape through if they choose to do so. How then can we be sure to remain in Jesus and not leave?

Several times, there are references in the Old Testament to remaining under the shadow of his wings (eg. Ps 17:8, 91:1). The picture is of chicks keeping in the warm, safe place. Jesus once said that he wanted to have this kind of relationship with the people of Jerusalem, but they refused it (Luke 13:34).

This warmth and safety is in contrast to the pain we discussed earlier. It seems hard to understand how the two can happen at once. Perhaps we might say that it is the presence of Jesus with believers which helps them to go through the hard patches.

During an episode in the film *Croc Dundee*, Karen, the newspaper reporter, is alarmed to be suddenly confronted by a youth threatening her with a knife in a street. But Mick calmly draws out his own blade, over twice as long, saying, "That's not a knife; this is a knife." As the youth and his friend run off in alarm, there is a picture of Karen standing against a wall saying, "I'm always alright when I'm with you, Mick."

These words could be echoed by the disciple when up against a brick wall. Jesus will look after his bride. What seemed fearful, even life-threatening, turns out to be an experience not to be missed (2 Cor 1:8).

Believers who remain in Jesus bear much fruit (v5). This seems impossible to believe; how can I, so weak and feeble, possibly bear fruit? The answer is by connection with the vine.

Feeling totally weak is appropriate. Vines are useless at anything else other than bearing grapes. The wood is so fibrous that you could not even make a peg out of it (Ezek 15:2-3). But it does bear excellent fruit if the sap keeps flowing through.

The way in which Jesus immediately begins to talk about love indicates that the sap is love (v9-17). We know that God is love (1 John 4:8 & 16), but you cannot exercise love without being in relationship. It takes two to love. "All that I am I give to you; all that I have I share with you." So say couples to each other at weddings. Believers are the bride of Christ, and are to pursue this high level of relationship with Jesus.

Jesus, for his part, has fully obeyed his father (v10); it is for disciples to do the same. Such whole-hearted obedience will lead to complete joy (v11). Carrying out God's will requires the follower to love even to the point of laying down life (v12-13). There is to be nothing held back, just as Jesus has not held back any of the Father's teaching from his followers (v15).

We might sum up the teaching of these opening verses of John 15 in the idea that all is possible with total commitment to God (v7). Believers who remain in Jesus cannot be dislodged. As a recent

song puts it, "All through the storm, your love is the anchor. My hope is in you alone (Faithful One, Brian Doerksen, Mercy Publishing, 1989)."

Finally, we may note what Jesus did not say. His followers are the branches, but he is not the stem, nor the trunk, but the whole vine, branches included. At the very least, this means that a Christian is to be Christ to his generation. There is to be no distinction between Jesus and his followers.

If this sounds impossible, consider the branch of a bank. Any feeling that the building on the High Street is somehow separate from the overall organisation will undermine the whole bank, branch and headquarters. For a bank to win customer confidence, its branches and headquarters must be completely one, in heart, policy, and finance.

Christians cannot replace Jesus, clearly, but they do need to be so one with him that people looking at them could say, "You are Jesus". This is another way of saying that followers of Jesus need to be filled with his Spirit.

Communication is vital for any relationship. The Christian keeps in close touch with God and deepens the relationship through speaking to God in prayer, and hearing from God through the Bible and prophecy. In order to fill out how we may remain in Christ, we will take these in turn in the following chapters.