

Sermon: Remembrance Day 13th November 2016

15 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes[Ⓜ] to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed[Ⓜ] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become[Ⓜ] my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants[Ⓜ] any longer, because the servant[Ⓜ] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

It's Remembrance Day, you'll have heard this passage preached dozens of times, some of you, as it comes around most Novembers. Greater has no man than he lay down his life for his friends, a most applicable verse. I don't know if I have anything new to add, but do hope to bring a useful perspective to a familiar passage while we consider the theme of remembrance.

(At this point I ask the children to find the plaque on the church wall listing the war dead.)

There isn't one! It's not that nobody went, it's that there wasn't a church here then! We'll be 90 years old shortly, so the horrors of the great war predate St Peter's. If there had been a church here though, I have no doubt her sons would have gone off just as they did across the land, and a plaque would stand on the wall recording the names of those who never returned. Whenever I see those plaques, whenever I stand in the cold at a Remembrance Day service, as I do every year, I am always a humbled. I often feel I could never have done it, I just don't have that sort of courage in me.

Of course, I'm probably wrong, we shouldn't underestimate our capacity to step up when needed. Those memorials up and down the country don't record the names of the bravest few men in the parish, but of ordinary men like you and I who dutifully answered the call, paying the full price of their ordinary lives.

On this day, we don't celebrate war, that would be grotesque. We commemorate the honour of the fallen, we honour their memory, and we REMEMBER, hopefully lest it happen again. Those who do not learn the lessons of history, as so many have said, are doomed to repeat them, and we do well, once a year, to remember the cost.

Talking to ex-servicemen, I've found that it still matters. There are still, yearly, new lives added to the list of those we ought to remember. People still give themselves to something they value beyond themselves, whatever their reasons for signing up. They who serve appreciate knowing that we remember them, at least once a year.

Those plaques and memorials talk almost exclusively about MEN, don't they? There were, and are, many women who serve. Now of course, they can be right on the front line, but back in WW1 and 2, they laid down their lives in a very different way. Women like my Gigi, Amelia's great grandmother who joined the WAAF, stepped out of their comfort zones and went off to serve in ways they had never expected. The women of the land army toiled in fields, women made bombs and spitfires. And, of course, women served gallantly in the wars as spies and so on.

They toiled at new work, in a daily sacrifice. (That's not to say it wasn't at all enjoyable, Gigi has many many great stories of that time and remembers her chance to contribute very fondly). I think, on balance, this daily sacrifice is much more relevant to what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading.

There may be times when we are called upon to lay down our lives in some kind of conflict, but thankfully for most of us that eventuality is rather unlikely. Certainly many members of the church internationally face that call daily, and we should remember them. Next Sunday is International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, which I encourage you all to look into. We are fortunate indeed to be spared such trials.

Are we then off the hook? Does Jesus command (and it is a command, we note) not apply to us? By no means!

Just as those who served valued something more than their very lives, just as they were prepared to risk all: security, family, home, hopes and dreams... So we are called to take

such risks for that which we claim to value above all. We too are called to lay down our lives in love for each other, to love one another to the extent that we are giving up our claims to choose our own life for each other. A tall order indeed!

How then are we to accomplish this feat of selflessness? If we had time, we might have read this speech of Jesus right from the start of Ch15, which I encourage you to do later. This one of the seven great “I am” discourses in John’s gospel, starting with I am the true vine. Jesus describes himself as the root of the vine-stock onto which we all are grafted. Our life comes only from being attached to him a living way. Everything I know about this I learned from Gardeners question time, and from time spent in vineyards. I’ve seen the grafting happen; every year big bushels of what look like twigs are stacked up in the fields and then each scion is carefully grafted on. Lo and behold, next season, they are full of life; first bright green leaves and then fruit: big bunches of grapes ready to be turned into lovely wine. It is, frankly, nothing short of miraculous.

Every year wine growers inspect their vines, cutting of old bits that no longer bear fruit, and more gently pruning those parts which do. Jesus tells us that the Father is such a gardener, checking to see which parts bear fruit.

The passage might seem like a bit of a warning: bear fruit or you’ll be pruned and thrown away, but I don’t take it like that. Rather than an instruction to bear fruit, it’s message is that fruit is an indication of life, a healthy symptom, if you will. After all, the vines aren’t trying their hardest to produce fruit, they are just there, connected. If we stay connected to Christ, his life will flow through us and we will bear fruit, it’s inevitable. The New Testament talks about fruit in a number of places, and I’m sure you know that in Galatians Paul tell us the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This isn’t a sermon about that, but I always find that list is a useful barometer for my spiritual life. If I see that fruit growing in me, I am abiding in Christ. If not, I know I have taken my eye off Jesus and need to do something about it, to invest in my spiritual disciplines. It might not be my job to grow fruit, only God can do that, but I do need to find ways to let him in, to give him space and time in my life.

John’s gospel of course talks much about the helper, the advocate, the Holy Spirit. You don’t do this alone, you allow him in to help, to partner with you in continuing to abide in Christ.

What does it actually look like?

So, the passage isn’t about joining the army, but more about living lives that look like Jesus’s life. *Cross shaped lives.*

The passage is talking about loving each other in the church.

It’s about loving these people here, around you, and at the various other services today, in a serving way. Look around. See the people Jesus commands you to love, young and old, male and female...

I have some questions for us, and I assure you these questions are for me as much as you.

If you're going to love these people, to live so that their needs are important, do you know their needs?

Do you know these people? I have to confess, I don't know many names yet, and I have a tendency to forget names, I bet I'm not alone, so I'm giving us all permission to ask each other our names this morning.

I could ask "how often do you allow someone else's needs to inconvenience you?" but I won't. Instead, I want to ask: "How often do you inconvenience others?"

It's not a very British thing, is it? But how else can we all fulfil this command, unless we are open enough with each other and allow each other to lay down their lives for us, just as we lay ours down for them, counting not only the cost, but the value.

After all, it's a key part of the mission: if we get this right, if we are truly united, then we point the way to Jesus, and we read in this same gospel in chapter 17: if we are one, the world will believe!

One last thought: The words here today are addressed to Jesus disciples, and most of us here are just that, we have answered God's call. If you haven't, let me make clear, his invitation still stands. You too are called by name. It might seem like a life of sacrifice, and it is, but I don't want to paint a gloomy picture. There is great joy in giving of ourselves to something which we value more than ourselves, and I wouldn't live any other way. If this has touched a nerve, do speak to me or Mark or anyone else after the service.

So that's my message for us all today.

Let us love one another.

Let us ask Jesus' promised helper to show us how and empower us in that love.

And finally, let us abide in Jesus, like that wonderful line from Anglican liturgy...that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.