

Introduction:

England's Hampton Court Palace, originally built in the early 16th century and situated southwest of London, was the lavish estate of King Henry VIII and it was one of his favourites.

In 1838 Queen Victoria opened Hampton Court to the public and it is now a major tourist attraction and setting for nationally important events. The palace is famous for its gorgeous gardens, Maze, and huge grapevine.

The vine is just over 250 years old, planted in 1768 for King George III. It is housed inside a purpose-built glasshouse.

It is the largest known grapevine in the world, and today it is over four metres (13 feet) around the base and its longest branch stretches more than 38 metres (125 feet).

The vine has become so entwined in the structure, branches curl around support beams, their leaves creating a thatched green canopy over the building's interior. In the spring, flowers fill the air with their fragrance.

Because of skillful cutting and pruning, the vine still produces much fruit. In August there is a three-week harvesting period, and about 270 kilos (600 lbs) of the sweet Black Hamburg dessert grapes are picked. Visitors to Hampton Palace can purchase their own bunches of grapes in early September. (*adapted from various sources: atlas obscura.com, britainsbestguides.org, hrp.org.uk, thecrownchronicles.co.uk*)

Even though some of the smaller branches are over a hundred feet away from the main stem, they bear much fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them.

God is the vine and we are the branches, and when we need pruning, the goal is always more fruit. That is the message of today's Gospel reading from John.

Jesus speaks in the first person, the **I AM**, and this chapter introduces the metaphor of Christ as the *true vine*, his father as the vinegrower, and his disciples as branches which must abide in him if they are to bear fruit. The disciples are warned not long before his trial and crucifixion; he knows what is going to happen but they do not.

As the Rev. Dr. David Lose explains, "*They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting but that they will survive, even flourish. The second context is that of the community for which John writes. Because by the time they hear these words they have already been scattered, likely thrown out of their synagogue, and have had plenty of reason to feel like they've been abandoned. But John writes to assure them that while they have indeed been cut, it is the pruning for more abundant fruit and life.*" (*davidlose.net, 2015*)

That is the promise: that the pruning will lead to more abundant fruit and life. How? What do we learn in this reading?

We learn about the kind of relationship we are to have with Jesus: *I am the Vine you are the branches.*

We learn that God is in charge, not us. This is hard for many of us; we tend to want to be in control of our lives. But how much lighter our lives are – not being the branch, just bearing the fruit. So...**Let go and let God!**

We learn how we are to maintain and nurture this relationship: *abiding in Jesus and following his commandments.*

How do we abide in Jesus? How do we know God? Remember the old saying, "*It's not what you know, it's who you know.*" So getting ahead is our connectedness with Jesus, having a close, intimate relationship with him, and following God's commandments.

And we learn how we will benefit from this relationship: *bearing fruit and experiencing joy.* The fruit of the spirit is joy. **Joy comes from within, an attitude rooted in our hearts by God.** It is an attitude of gratitude and counting our blessings.

There are many times in our lives when we are discouraged, and sometimes we forget to allow God to guide us. We're tired, we're exhausted, we can't do it any more. We've allowed the weeds in our life to thrive, and we fail to produce healthy fruit. Jesus shared a great object lesson with us and is illustrated by Pastor Andy Cook in his sermon, "Created to Bear Fruit":

"Have you ever seen a grape vine that was stressed out? Or have you ever seen a cotton plant that couldn't decide between producing cotton or bananas? Could you imagine a blueberry bush crying in her bedroom, banging her little blueberry fists on the bed and crying out, "I just can't do this anymore!?"

No, those kinds of things just don't happen, because plants produce fruit naturally. They have the wonderful, loving, guiding hand of the [vinegrower], and they don't have to do anything except what they were designed to do." (lifeway.com, 2014)

And Jesus's words remind us that in the good times and bad, and especially now with the ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19, God is always working in us toward spiritual renewal and fruitfulness. Since March of last year, we have been living in a season of isolation, our lives turned upside down. We have been quarantined, sheltering in place, locked down, freed somewhat with fewer restrictions, and now back in shut down. We try our best to abide by the social distancing and mask wearing guidelines. Aspects of our lives that were and are important to us have been put on hold until normal or near-normal returns. This time of uncertainty has been anxiety-inducing...we don't know how long it will last. But the pandemic has helped us value what truly, truly matters in our lives.

And all the while, God is working in us.

During "pruning" seasons of suffering, we may wonder if we will ever thrive again. We can use this time to allow new growth in our lives and in our relationship with God. Jesus encourages us to continue to abide in Him - verse 4: Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

The word "abide" appears eight times in this Gospel reading. And the most important task as Christians is to abide.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary various synonyms include to dwell, to remain, to stay, to persevere, to stick around, to cling, to hang in for the long haul. Jesus asks us to stay constant in our relationship with Him. But abide also means to grow, to change, to multiply, to weed out the bad, and, if we abide, we'll get pruned.

Fred Rogers, the children's show host of Mister Rogers Neighborhood, who was also a Presbyterian minister, often used to say that even people who are bad most of the time are good some of the time. And even people who are good most of the time are bad some of the time. (*Sometimes People Are Good by Fred Rogers | © 1967, Fred M. Rogers*)

So God prunes away the bad in all of us to produce much fruit, to abide in Him.

The Greek word for "prune" – katharizo – is related to the word for "cleansing" – kathairo – which translates into English as "catharis" - to purge, purify, release.

We all need spiritual cleansing and renewal in the different seasons of our lives, and since the setting of today's Gospel reading is spring, now would be the perfect time to let go and let God do the pruning, to remove whatever must be removed so that we bear much fruit.

This is what we were made for. Abide.

Amen