

## The Terroir of God's Kingdom

I don't usually have a competitive spirit. But as Peter went in search of sheep last week in reflecting upon Jesus' words 'I am the good shepherd', I've been in search of vineyards this week as we reflect upon Jesus' words 'I am the true vine'. And surprisingly, I haven't needed to leave my parish. I'm at High Clendon, appropriately named as the view from this elevated part of the Surrey Hills area of outstanding natural beauty is absolutely stunning. One of the key words in the vocabulary of winemakers is *terroir*. It refers to that mystical marriage of viticulture, geology, and climate which influences the character and quality of the grape and so the wine. Here in this hidden corner of our parish, the Tindall family have discovered a perfect combination of all three. The small size of the vineyard enables hand manicuring of the vines with careful pruning; the chalky limestone here is the same geological stratum as that of the Champagne region; and the gently sloping hills, which face south-east, help to capture and concentrate sunlight and ripen the grapes, whilst also protecting them from debilitating spring frosts.

I've wondered this week whether *terroir* might be an interesting concept for both discipleship and mission. But before considering that, a reminder of the context of this passage in John's gospel. Whilst maths was always my achilles heel in school, I've long been interested by the significance of numbers in scripture. The number 7 always represents completion, perfection or wholeness. [Completely unintentionally, each of my chapters of ministry has been about 7 years - such as it has begun to make Louise uncomfortable at the six and a half year point!]. Sometimes referred to as God's perfect number, 7 appears over 700 times in the Bible from the seven days of creation in Genesis, to the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. It's particularly prominent in the Gospel of John: seven signs, seven feasts, seven references to Jesus' hour, seven personal testimonies, seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus. I remember learning them as a boy in Sunday school. Each of them applies one of the great Hebrew images of bread, light, door, shepherd, way, truth and life. But the seventh one (a little like the seventh sign in John's Gospel) feels like something of a climax: 'I am the true vine'.

Within the Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture, a metaphor of Israel. Psalm 80 celebrates how God '*brought a vine out of Egypt; drove out the nations and planted it; cleared the ground for it*'<sup>1</sup> giving it a rich *terroir*. And yet regrettably, most references to this vine allude to the poor fruit that it yielded. Most notably, Isaiah, in his 'song of the vineyard', laments that, despite the care with which God has planted the vineyard, watered it, tended it and protected it, the fruit has been a great disappointment: '*when I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?*'<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah also voices God's lament that '*I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?*'<sup>3</sup> When Jesus talked about the vine, it would have made immediate connection with the people of ancient Israel. It was a symbol, a metaphor that was deeply ingrained into their psyche. Reflecting its theological significance, a beautiful golden vine adorned one of the gates of the temple in Jerusalem. A vine was also portrayed on the coins minted during the revolt against Rome which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70.

And so the seventh of Jesus' 'I am' sayings has cataclysmic theological significance. By saying 'I am the true vine', Jesus is making a dangerous, outrageous and yet remarkable, liberating claim. He's announcing that he is the 'new Israel'. The people of Israel have struggled to produce decent fruit and so he's taking over. No longer will these vines be choked by thorns and weeds and attacked by wild animals and rodents because he himself will be the vine, unreachable by those who attempt to destroy and steal. This vine will produce the finest fruit and finest wine which will save, transform and make glad the hearts of all nations. Whilst we know there's no account of the Last Supper in John, there are strong eucharistic overtones in many places, not least here. Significant perhaps that 'I am the bread of life' was the first 'I am' saying back in chapter 6, and 'I am the true vine' the last in chapter 15: the bread and the wine forming the bookends for the signs that point to the mystery of our salvation. I also sense the part that the whole Trinity plays in the creation of this *terroir* for the kingdom of God: viticulture, geology, climate.

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 80:8, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 5:2, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 2:21, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*

The viticulture is provided by God the Father. He, of course, precedes the vine as the one who planted it and who has nurtured it and who prunes it. <sup>4</sup> The key word here is καθαίρω which means 'to clean out'. He 'cleans out' the branches bearing no fruit. And he's delighted of our help. I remember as a curate watching a parishioner who was an expert in viticulture prune his vines. It's an art and not always easy to identify what needs pruning. I wonder whether you and I are able to identify the [sometimes painful] bits of pruning that are needed in our own lives? I rejoice that the Church of England has just identified one aspect of its life that needs serious pruning. *From Lament to Action*: the report on racial injustice, which was published just last week, identifies some serious issues of health that need to be faced: branches that need to be addressed for the health of the whole vine.<sup>5</sup> If you haven't dipped into this, I encourage you to do so. It makes for very painful reading but if we can commit to the 47 bits of pruning that have been identified in its recommendations, the Church of England will be a healthier branch of the vine.

The geology is provided by God the Son. Unlike the vines around me which are fed from the soil beneath them, the true vine feeds both the soil beneath it, the air around it, and the fruits upon it. As the branches, you and I simply need to remain grafted into the vine. The key word here is μένω which is translated by most Bibles as 'abide'. It appears eight times in these eight verses. In John's gospel, that has the effect of bold, italic and underlining at the same time! Μένω is not easily translatable. It kind of means to be resilient in the face of adversity. A shipwrecked sailor, buffeted by storms, clinging to a rock, uncertain of rescue, but with internal peace - that is μένω. It's what the disciples lacked in Gethsemane. The lesson is applied in this text both negatively (in that branches cannot bear fruit by themselves) and positively (that branches that remain on the vine bear much fruit). The urgent question for us here is 'how do we abide? How do we manage μένω in our own lives? What are our patterns of prayer, reading the Bible and worshipping with the church?' - all of which are absolutely crucial in ensuring we remain those who μένω.

The climate is provided by the Holy Spirit. On this first Sunday in May we begin to turn towards Pentecost. We know that the challenges of being pruned by the viticulture of the Father and abiding in the vine of the Son are often a struggle for us. This is why we need the gift of the Spirit who both intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words, and provides the energy and light that enables us to bear much fruit: which is the prayer of Jesus at the end of today's gospel reading. If we'd read on just another verse, we'd have heard what this climate looks like: '*as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love*' <sup>6</sup> - which culminates with the commandment to '*love one another as I have loved you*'. It's a climate further expanded by the epistle appointed for today from the first letter of John: '*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God*'.<sup>7</sup> It isn't rocket science. And yet it's costly. Love in John's Gospel is a verb. As the fruit of the vine is poured out in love for the world, so the fruits that we bear are also called to be poured out in our love and service of others.

It's been a delight to walk up the hill and abide in this vineyard this afternoon. My prayer is that, as I reflect on the *terrior* on which I stand, I pray that I and you would more and more intentionally inhabit the *terrior* of God's kingdom: that, subject to the viticulture of the Father, the geology of the Son and the climate of the Holy Spirit, we may indeed glorify our Father by bearing much fruit and becoming his disciples.

R Paul Davies  
Archdeacon of Surrey  
2 May 2021

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<sup>4</sup> John 15:2, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>5</sup> Church of England Report: From Lament to Action

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> John 15:10, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:7, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*