

# WEDNESDAY SUPPLEMENT

6<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Christ is Risen!  
**He is Risen Indeed!**

Welcome to this week's Wednesday Supplement. There are devotions on page 4 as part of the Bible Study.

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## CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME

Thank you to Belinda, Linda, Meg and Stuart for variously reading and intercessing for us on Sunday. Please consider whether you might be able to do this: it is lovely to have a range of different voices to keep the service fresh. Drop me a line if you think you might be willing, or just need a bit of technical advice.

I am also glad to receive contributions to the *Supplements*. I have been delighted to include pieces from Christ Smith (Broughton) twice already. Today, it's my pleasure to include the first contribution from Josh Seligman (Broughton).

## MORNING PRAYER

If you are one of our regular or occasional listeners to Morning Prayer, I would be glad to hear from you by email with answers to the following questions (to the extent you feel able to answer):

1. What attracts you to Morning Prayer?
2. How often do you listen?
3. At what time do you listen?
4. Do you listen via *AChurchNearYou* or YouTube?
5. Is there anything I could do or provide, in order to make the experience easier or more fruitful?
6. Do you use any other structured prayer tool on a regular basis?
7. Would you continue listening when the lockdown is over?
8. Would you be interested in a future opportunity for daily prayer, either in a church building or by videoconferencing?
9. Is there a time of day that you prefer or is more convenient, eg. Evening Prayer or Compline?
10. Would you be interested in using other liturgical materials in addition to *Common Worship Daily Prayer*?

I am conscious that the daily morning prayer offering is new since the lockdown, but the traffic analysis shows a larger group taking advantage of it (albeit not the same people every day) than I had anticipated. I am keen to evaluate how we could build on this ministry while ensuring that the resources it requires are proportionate to the benefit it delivers. Your thoughts as a listener (or indeed as a non-listener) would be most welcome. It's time to start thinking about the future; let's start in this small way!

## SCHOOL GOVERNORS

Two Church of England schools outside our parishes, but within reasonable driving distance, are seeking new governors.

Our 5000 church schools are heirs to a tradition of service to the community which goes back to the foundation of the National Society in 1811. Supporting their ministry through governance, and volunteering of all kinds, is one of our most important duties as a Christian community.

If you are interested in finding out more, please contact Charlotte confidentially:

[charlotte.tudway@carlisle-diocese.org.uk](mailto:charlotte.tudway@carlisle-diocese.org.uk)

## CHRISTIAN AID WEEK



There are now resources for prayer and worship, a daily quiz and opportunities for e-giving on the Christian Aid website:

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/christian-aid-week/virtual-fundraisers>

Fortunately, Christian Aid is no longer as dependent on its annual door-to-door collections as it once was. Nevertheless, its income, and its ability to work with the poorest in the world is bound to be affected, like other charities, by the lockdown. Please visit the website and consider how you might support Christian Aid this year.



Reilig Oran and St Orans Chapel.  
Photograph by Josh Seligman.

## PREPARING FOR THE RESURRECTION

**Josh Seligman** reflects on the Celtic Saints' understanding of life as pilgrimage.

This Easter season, we have been celebrating that Christ is risen. His resurrection points to the fact that we, too, will rise again from physical death.

This is what Jesus teaches his disciples:

*“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it ... I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ... Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”* (John 5:21, 25, 28–29).

In other words, a resurrection awaits us all, and after that, a reckoning of our lives: those who followed Christ will experience fullness of life, and those who shunned Christ and did evil will face condemnation.

My wife Miriam and I used to live and work at the Iona Abbey on the Isle of Iona, Scotland. There the Iona Community hosts a weekly pilgrimage in which pilgrims walk around the island in prayer and reflection.

The last stop of the pilgrimage is Reilig Oran, an ancient graveyard where kings, common people and Saints have been buried for over 1,000 years. Standing in a small chapel, the pilgrims remember how Christ's own tomb

was not only the location of his burial, but more importantly, the location of his resurrection.

Then the group remembers many Celtic Saints who have come before, who themselves embarked on pilgrimages seeking the ‘place of their resurrection’: the places where they would serve God until they died, trusting that there they would hear Christ's voice calling them out of their sleep on the morning of their resurrection.

Such Saints recognised that this world was not their home; they were pilgrims journeying towards the kingdom of God. Like the Hebrews exiled in Babylon, although they sought the welfare of the lands in which they lived (Jeremiah 29:7), they strived for their true homeland of eternal life in God. They prepared themselves, body and soul, to meet Christ face to face.

Such a vision transformed everything they did. They steeped their lives in prayer and worship, which overflowed and expressed itself in love for one another, hospitality towards those in need and concern for the salvation and wellbeing of all people. They experienced Christ's power in their lives, the influence of which continues to be recognised and remembered today.

We, too, are invited to be pilgrims journeying towards our true home.

How can we, like the Saints, prepare ourselves for our resurrection?

## BIBLE STUDY

*I thought that we might use the space available in this Wednesday Supplement for a Bible Study. I have used the famous passage, beloved of Churches Together groups all over the country, "I am the vine, you are the branches" from John 15:1-8. Such is the depth of meaning and interrelation in scripture that we can inevitably only look at a few aspects of the text and, perhaps, only scratch the surface of those. I hope that this may provide a platform for your own contemplation of the passage, which reads as follows (NRSVA translation):*

*'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide 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. <sup>5</sup>I 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. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

### **What is the immediate context?**

We tend to hear read in church, or study, Bible passages that stand as distinctive, coherent units (known by the Greek word 'pericope', a cutting-out). We need to be careful not to let this practical necessity place limits on our understanding. Scripture always needs to be read in context. The broad context for this passage is that it is part of Jesus' 'last discourses', or 'farewell discourse', extending broadly from John 13 to John 17. The organisation of this material can itself be analysed to demonstrate an intentional structure which conveys meaning.

The verses which follow our passage, John 15:9-17, are generally regarded as explaining and expanding upon it. When you have finished with John 15:1-8, you might like to read on and see how the subsequent material helps illuminate what you have read and thought. It is often suggested that verses 1 to 8 speak of the relationship between the believer and Jesus, while verses 9 to 17 speak of the relationship between believer and believer; and verses 18 to 27 between believer and a hostile world. How rigid is this

distinction? In what ways do these passages in fact inform one another?

The preceding chapter, John 14, speaks of Jesus' departure to the Father (14:2, 12, 28). It emphasises that we will not be left as orphans but rather return (14:18); in the meantime, Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit (14:26). Our passage seems to affirm these assurances by emphasising the connection between Jesus and his disciples.

One point to ponder: look at the immediately preceding verse, 14:31, in which Jesus says "Rise, let us be on our way." Is the whole conversation prior to this at the Last Supper (13:2)? Are we to think that from 15:1, Jesus is speaking while walking? If so, from where does he leave in 18:1? Is the whole farewell discourse a single reported occasion, or is it perhaps a digest of all the final things of which Jesus spoke?

### **What is the wider scriptural context?**

The vineyard as an image for the people of Israel whom God has chosen and nurtured is found several times in the Old Testament. Psalm 80 is a prominent example ("You brought a vine out of Egypt"). Another is Isaiah 5:1-7, which Jesus uses as the basis for one of his other vineyard parables, that of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-46 // Mark 12:1-12 // Luke 20:9-19). The failings of the original vineyard were recognised before Jesus' time: see also Jeremiah 2:21 and Ezekiel 19:10-14.

### **What genre of text are we looking at?**

Just as important as context is *genre*, the type of writing. We do not read the poetry, history, proverbs, songs or narrative in the same way, in the Bible or elsewhere. Nor do we interpret all 'narrative' as the same: Genesis is clearly narrative of a different kind to Mark's Gospel, for example. And this passage is distinctive again.

Within the Gospels, we might (for example) distinguish direct speech and, within Jesus' direct speech, we distinguish that he often speaks in parables. These are a prime example of something which is not 'true', but contains 'truth'. Interpreting parables is a whole study in itself, but for now let's just note that this is what we are dealing with. Jesus isn't speaking literally, but what he is conveying is true in the profoundest sense. In this parable, God the Father is the vinedresser; Disciples, or the Church, are the branches – the fruitless among which are cut off and discarded!

### **Key concepts**

Jesus does not say that he is 'like' a vine, but that he is the vine. The use of a metaphor rather than a simile

might serve to strengthen the sense of assurance, the close connection that is being communicated. Obviously, Jesus does not directly provide earthly, material sustenance to his disciples, as a real vine does for its branches (although of course, indirectly, God *does* sustain us in our daily needs: Matthew 6:26-34). What we are to envisage is a spiritual connection, perhaps of necessity, as close as two parts of the same organism: this is a point to take forward into our devotions, below. The vine might equally be seen as a metaphor for the church, the Body of Christ. The way the metaphor blends the material and spiritual reflects the way in which our own lives blend the physical and metaphysical.

The word 'abide' is important: the closeness of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is described in terms of 'abiding', which is descriptive of the extraordinary mutual life shared between the vinedresser, vine and branches. Similar ideas were at work in 14:11 (I am in the Father and the Father in Me) and 14:17 (The Spirit lives with you and will be in you).

### **Thrown into the fire and burned (vv. 2 and 6)**

Whenever fire is mentioned in the Bible, the temptation is to proceed directly to thinking about judgment and eternal punishment. The ambiguity of a parable certainly invites us to range widely in our thoughts, but let's not rush to judgment first! As we have seen, the parable is primarily about the relationship between the vine and its branches. What does the possibility of an unfruitful branch tell us?

It suggests that it is possible to be on the vine, that is, in the church, in a notional way, but not in a real, fruitful, way as Jesus intends. A fruitless branch, one readily consignable to the flames, suggests dryness, lack of vitality, perhaps a branch that does not seek the light or draw on the nourishment coming up through the vine. It might be a life that, although ostensibly lived within the church, lacks the love for others that the perfect mystical relationship between Father and Son models, and which being part of one body also requires.

Jesus' concern does not appear to be the *kind* of vine/body/church, so we would probably hijack the parable for contemporary church politics if we were to use it to criticise one style or party within the Church. It seems more logical, given that the focus is on individual disciples within the body, to see it as a warning against fruitless faith. 'Religion', mere outward membership of the Body of Christ is not enough. Is a relationship of some kind with God enough, if it does not have some real world consequences? (If you were put on trial for Christianity, is there enough evidence

to convict you?) Real participation with God, not with outward forms, is required. The consequence of not growing within the vine (seeking God and drawing nourishment from Him) is that no fruit is borne. What is this fruit? Is this teaching a parallel with the less poetic, but more direct, words of James 2:14-26 (faith without works is dead)? Are the fruitful and unfruitful vines like the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 (a parable, it is to be noted, about judgment, in which the King identifies the righteous by their service to a range of others, likely to be outside their social group).

### **Bearing fruit (vv. 2 and 5)**

The message of the passage appears to be that the mystical abiding of vinedresser, vine and branches is not merely for its own sake, but so that, like the vine, good fruit may result. This fruit is borne in the strength of God, not under our own steam (v.4). The required fruit is the witness or modelling by disciples to the love that is between Father and Son, both toward other disciples and toward the wider world: "*as the Father sent me, so I send you...*" (John 20:21-22). This witness consists of being Christ-like, in the sense of passing through the world teaching and healing, and also in obedience to Jesus' commandments, such as those expressed by reference to the sheep and goats. The sacrificial nature of the required love becomes apparent in the text that follows: "*The greatest love between friends is to lay down one's life for the other.*" (John 15:12-14). Jesus shares with his disciples everything that he receives from the Father (John 15:15): friends resemble one another in their thought, speech and action. To be truly fruitful, we must be like Christ, obeying his instructions, speaking and acting like Him.

### **Devotions**

Re-read John 15:1-8 and any other passages that seemed relevant to you. Contemplate the vine. Each individual branch is supported by the rest of the plant: held so that it can be nourished by the light from above; supplied with living water from the roots. Small wonder that the branch which remains closely connected to the vine bears the fruit which it was intended to bear.

Consider how you abide in Christ. How can you move closer to him? Think of all the fruits he wants you to bear. What are the commands of the Lord which you find most difficult? Is it proclaiming your faith? Loving a particular enemy, perhaps? Keeping your material possessions in their proper perspective?

Pray that the Lord will support and nourish you; that you may be strengthened to move closer to his will, bearing fruit that is a little richer and more plentiful.