

EASTER 5 (2024)

If you remember last week, I asked Liz if she would open her birthday present from Junior Church – and I got that stern Head teacher face – which meant ‘No!’ Worry not, I have it here. It is a Bible of sorts... “The Complete Gardener” by Monty Don. Right near the end (on p.428) is an understandably short section, titled ‘GRAPES’ – and this is how it starts:

“Climate change is not all bad news. It certainly means that more and more parts of Britain are becoming conducive to growing grapes. We all know that in the last warm period of our modern history – from Roman times until the early Tudor period – there were vineyards all over the country. Most monasteries grew grapes and if you have a south-facing spot, preferably with protection from or absence of late or early frosts in spring and autumn, you can grow good grapes for wine. A bottle of wine takes roughly 1kg (2 ¼ lb) of grapes, which is about five clusters or bunches. A healthy vine should produce around 40 clusters a season or up to ten bottles of wine. So plant a dozen vines and you could have a harvest of ten cases of your own vintage every year.”

Well, Monty Don, I have to disagree on two fronts:

1. Climate change seems to have brought us only rain and cold this April and, more rain, so why bother to grow grapes at all?
2. Even if you live in East Sussex or Kent (where the sun really shines) which has had some success on the sparkling wine

front (I think of Chapel Down for example), it still costs a small fortune to buy and anyway, the Rector of St Mary's Woodbridge prefers champagne, from... France!

It is just too difficult to grow vines, Monty, and if I may take advantage of both churchwardens' being elsewhere today, we don't even use proper wine here for our Parish Eucharist. We use this: British Cream Sherry! So, controversially, I digress...

But something we can grow well in this country and by far the tastiest, are **tomatoes** on the vine. They help us keep alive the words of Jesus even though our geography and climate is different from Israel or Palestine. The last of his 7 "I am" statements in John's Gospel, "I am the true vine", is a clear declaration that He is the chosen one, perfectly obedient to God's will as he affects salvation for the world.

It is a big statement and declaration. But the image of our being rooted and intimately connected to Him and He to us, like tomatoes or grapes on the vine, is a fantastic parable for what it means to be Church and, truly catholic, across the world. It is a fantastic parable for our learning to be fruitful and to believe that, when we concentrate on how best to nurture and grow that community of faith, we can really flourish and, of course, together. Relationship is the key.

Jesus presents the interdependence of the Trinity – the Son as vine, tended by the Father and flowing with the sap of the Spirit. Believers like you and I are invited into this intimate relationship. We belong as dependent branches, receiving the

vine's vital nurture for truly Godly fruit. Discipleship is not a self-sufficient, solo enterprise. In that sense, Jesus' words are stark. We achieve nothing for the kingdom without being fully connected to the King. Being a detached, or even a semi-detached, branch renders it fruitless. So I think you do know what I am saying here. We need to remake the case to our own families, colleagues & neighbours, why it is so important to come together as Church, as Christians in community, bound up together, connected and called: to love, serve and follow Our Lord - because this is what he asks of us and calls us to be.

I love Monty Don really! He lifts our spirits perhaps because we can really feel the value of putting more of our time into the issues of nurture and new growth. We do have to encourage more baptisms here, communion and confirmation opportunities, sharing the wisdom of many years with those perhaps just beginning to tip their toes into the challenges of horticulture and the challenges of Christian faith and belonging. In just a few weeks, we really want big numbers to come together for just 5 Wednesday evenings to tease out how we can learn from one another about our human relationships and yes, our sexuality, in new and non-judgemental ways. I have put a few notices up about 'Living in FAITH AND LOVE' as it is called, as well as an excellent recent article in the Church Times by Christopher Landau. I think the challenge for all of us is to discover fresh understanding and new insights instead of being reported in black and white by a hostile press - which prefers soundbites

to truth, or worse, which wants to see the C of E shrivel up completely and die out.