

“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

5. Fruitful People

John 15:1-17

We had a bit of a break from it last week when Ossie Post came and spoke to us about the work of African Enterprise, but you will, I hope, recall that we’ve been spending a few weeks looking at what it means that we call ourselves “Christians”, taking the name of Jesus for ourselves and finding our identity in him. Originally, the word was coined as a nickname, a term of ridicule applied to those people in first-century Antioch who claimed to follow Jesus Christ. Over the centuries we’ve adopted it as our name to show that Jesus is where we find our true identity. We are “Christians” – a noun. We do not just tack the word onto other things as an adjective, as a kind of additional element to our lifestyle, to our profession, to other things in which we are tempted to find our identity. We are to be followers of Jesus, disciples, people secure in our relationship with him, and eager to live as he asks us to.

The last time we looked at this we considered the importance of good foundations. Jesus told a story of two builders to illustrate that our security as his followers is to be found in the way we put his teaching into practice, the way we live out our commitment to him. It’s all to do with a phrase we’ve often used – “Living a life that matters”. It’s not just about coping with the vicissitudes of life as a vulnerable, fragile, fallen human being, but about making a difference for the Kingdom of God, living out here and now something of what we have to look forward to for eternity. When we were talking about those foundations, we said that the New Testament writers often use the phrase “*rooted and grounded*”, so this morning we’re going to reflect on that “*rooted*” aspect of this – the image of a tree or plant that puts down its roots, the better to grow well and the better to produce its fruit.

We need to have **ROOTS** and a **RELATIONSHIP**, so let’s explore what that might mean for us and I hope that it might help us in our desire to follow Jesus more effectively. If we are truly to be his disciples, then we should be, as Jesus puts it here, “*bearing fruit*” or helping to multiply that group of people – just as those very first disciples, Andrew and Philip, did when, having encountered Jesus for the first time earlier in John’s Gospel, they immediately went off and told others what was happening in their lives. In the Psalm we read earlier, *Psalm 1*, we read that the true person of God is like a tree planted by a stream of water, putting its roots down into the water and growing healthy and strong because of that.

And Jesus makes use of a similarly horticultural metaphor here as he likens his followers to branches of a vine. Once again, the important idea is that of **ROOTS**, of having a good foundation and of being connected into the network of good things that can nourish and nurture us in our growth and activity followers of Jesus. Those roots go in several directions for us as Christians – and they’re all important for us if we are to be able to live as God wants us to.

Firstly, our roots should go down into God's word, **THE BIBLE**. The Psalmist writes of reading and "*meditating*" on God's word or "*the law of the LORD*" constantly – "*day and night*". He actually calls it his "*delight*". If we are to follow Jesus effectively, if we are to be able to draw on the resources that he offers, then we cannot escape the need to be reading the Bible regularly, frequently, avidly at all times. I don't think this is necessarily a basis for telling people to read the Bible as soon as they get up and last thing at night, but rather an encouragement to read the Bible often and, if it helps you to do it regularly, at set times of the day.

I cannot stress it too strongly – if you want to follow Jesus, if you want to live a life that matters, if you want to discover your identity in him, you need to be getting your Bible open every day and reading it – and not just reading it but meditating on it. How might that work in practice, then? I realise that we're not all great readers and some of us just don't get on with books, so this isn't something to get really hung up about, but it is the primary way in which God lets us know about himself and about his plan for our lives and his world. Try setting aside a few minutes each day at a time when you're not going to be disturbed, depending on your routines and your personality (a morning person or an evening person, for example) – ten minutes as soon as you wake up, maybe, or a few minutes when you get into bed at night, a short time during your lunch break or when you get back indoors after taking the kids to school. It might be a good idea to get some daily Bible reading notes which give you a passage to read each day and then some kind of help explaining it. There are plenty of such guides on offer and many of you probably already use them – in old-fashioned printed form or via some kind of on-line or social media set-up. Or you might want to read through a book of the Bible a chapter at a time. And when you've read whatever section of the Bible that is set for that day, reflect on it, mull over what it has said, think how it might apply to you and to your life.

And if reading really isn't your thing, then listen to it. There are plenty of versions on-line that you can sit and listen to, or have on while you're going about your daily routine, or have on your 'phone or whatever while you're out jogging or on the turbo trainer in the garage. If you're really old-fashioned you can get the Bible as an audio book on CD (or, if you still have the equipment, a cassette tape!).

As with any other activity, it might take a while really to get going, but eventually it will become a part of your routine, a daily habit, and you'll start to discover all kinds of amazing things about God, about the world and about yourself as you read. There will be times when you might find that what you're reading doesn't seem to make sense to you or that it's not really firing your enthusiasm. Don't give up. Stick at it and give God further opportunity to speak to you through it. But as you read and become more and more

acquainted with the things that are written there, so you will be putting down roots into the bedrock, really, of the Christian faith.

And those roots need to go down, too, into what I'll call the **TRADITION** of Christianity. The Bible has always been at the very heart of the Christian faith and, over the centuries, scholars and preachers, prophets and writers, intellectuals and ordinary people like you and me have brought their collective wisdom to bear on what God has said. There's been some stuff written and said that doesn't entirely line up with the real message that God has for us, but the vast majority of what the church has taught over the years is helpful in the way we apply what God says in the Bible to our own daily lives. Put some roots down into that as well by reading other books about God and the Bible. Get rooted into it all by getting involved in the life of the church: join a home-group, meet with others to pray and discuss, dip your toes into the murky waters of church history or biography and see how the men and women of God have lived lives that matter down through the centuries. The tradition doesn't replace the Bible, nor, indeed, does it really have the same authority and power, but it can certainly help. Paul, when he was writing to the Corinthian Christians, talked about the "*tradition*" of the communion story – it literally means "what was handed on to me". And that's what we're about when we put our roots down into the collective wisdom and practice of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So we need **ROOTS** in the Bible and in the community of God's people, but there's one other very important direction in which we need to put down our roots, and that's our second main point this morning. Again, it comes out of what Jesus says to his followers here in *John 15*, using this (to them) familiar image of the vine. If we are to develop our identity in Jesus, live lives that matter, then we need to ensure we have roots in a **RELATIONSHIP** with Jesus. Jesus here talks about his disciples being his "*friends*" (vv14,15) and we are to be linked to him in that relationship, a relationship which transforms our lives and can, if we allow it, spill over to those around us. It's an organic relationship, a deep and integral part of our discipleship. This picture that Jesus uses is that of a vine – a plant that would have been more familiar to his first listeners than to most of us – but the principle is the same for something we'd see more frequently in our part of the world, such as an apple tree or a blackcurrant bush. If a branch is going to do what it's supposed to do – produce some fruit – then it has to be connected to the main plant, from which it draws nourishment and strength and life. If we are to produce fruit – if we are to help others get to know Jesus – then we need to be rooted in that relationship with him. The true disciple, the person who is really living the life that matters, is connected in to Jesus, is an integral part of him, and draws nourishment and strength and inspiration from him.

How does that happen, then? Jesus isn't here. We're not physically attached to him as a branch is to a vine or tree. How can we cultivate (another horticultural word) that necessary relationship with him? How can

we “*remain*” or “*abide*” in him? Well, the first thing is to recognise what we’ve already said: we are **FRIENDS** with him. We need consciously to acknowledge that, to keep telling ourselves that we have been drawn into friendship with him. And what’s even more wonderful than being friends with the Son of God himself is that he has actually chosen us to be his friends (*v16*). I’m sure you come across people who claim to be friends with celebrities or well-known people within a particular field. Ministers’ conferences are full of such people, and I’m probably as much of a culprit as the next person – name-droppers who are actually little more than stalkers, whose friendship with so-and-so is all one way because the other person isn’t really interested in the one who claims to be their friend. But Jesus has chosen us! He is a true friend because the initiative has come from him.

Now, if you stop for a moment and think about that it is an amazing fact. The second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, Creator and Redeemer of the world, the most awesome being who has ever lived, wants to be your friend, wants a relationship of deep friendship with you. The Co-creator of the Universe, the awesome God of history, the Ancient of Days, the God who can split atoms and pulverise mountains, who can paint a fiery sunset on the backcloth of the heavens and trace the patterns on the feathers of the humming-bird, who allows world leaders to strut their stuff before the nations and choreographs the dance of the bumble bee within the hive, who sweeps the ocean floor and wipes the clouds across the skies – you can call him “Friend”.

Now, if you tell yourself that every morning as you get up, and remind yourself of it every night as you go to bed, if you think about it when other people are making your life hard and things aren’t going quite as you’d like them to, then that’s a really uplifting thought. “I’m a friend of Jesus – and it’s his idea!”

But that friendship has to be sustained. As with any ordinary friendship, it can easily fizzle out if you’re not careful. When I think back over all the people I would have considered myself to be really friendly with at school or university or at another church or in the football team or band or whatever, I have nothing to do with the vast majority of them now because we haven’t kept the friendship alive: we haven’t talked to each other, communicated with each other, bothered to try and get in touch. And sometimes when we do try to rekindle a relationship like that, the long gap means that things can never really get going again. One of my best friends from school, whom I had not seen for well over forty years, tracked me down a couple of years ago via the Internet and we met up for a drink, but we no longer have anything in common and I doubt we’ll ever meet again. We’ve grown too far apart. If we want to have our roots in the relationship with Jesus constantly strengthened, we need to be active in sustaining that.

And we can do that by talking to and listening to Jesus – again, just like any other friendship. In this context we call it **PRAYER**. A lot of us probably have a very mechanical idea of prayer – a quick thank you for

something we realise Jesus has done, maybe sorry for something that is really weighing on our minds, and then a long list of stuff we want to happen. How would that work in any other relationship? You have breakfast with your wife, mutter a quick thanks for the porridge, tell her you're sorry you forgot to put out the bins, and then spend ten minutes telling her all you expect her to do during the day. If that was to be the regular pattern of your communication then you'd probably not last too long as a couple. Prayer is more than simply rabbiting on at Jesus about what you'd like him to do for you, your family and your kids' school or your rugby team.

Prayer does, of course, involve talking to Jesus. We do need to thank him for his wonderful gifts and his continuing grace. And it is helpful to find a regular slot each day when you can do that – not necessarily on your knees by the side of the bed, but walking to the station each morning or having a coffee once the kids have left for school or in the park with the dog. It is very good to get off our chest all those things we know we've done and said wrong, and to ask for his forgiveness. There will be plenty of times when we really do need Jesus' help – after all, what's the point in having a powerful friend if you can't ask for favours now and again? And we do want to tell him about all the things we see in the world that are upsetting us, and ask if he couldn't do something to sort them out – protecting friends, healing relatives, sustaining the downtrodden and defeated.

But in a true friendship – and there is none truer than this one – the conversation cannot be one way all the time. We need to listen to Jesus as well. Easier said than done, of course! That's something we need to work on. Partly we listen to him through reading the Bible, as we've already said this morning. God can speak clearly through the Bible to us. There may be a question we've got that is answered by a particular sentence or passage. It may be that, as we read, something jumps out at us in an unexpected way. Maybe we just find comfort in some of the words we read or we realise that we are not the only one going through a particularly difficult time. But also we need to be alive to the way Jesus speaks to us through our thoughts and through our circumstances – and sometimes sends messages to us through mutual friends as another Christian says something to us that is just what we need to hear.

And there are times when our roots in this relationship are strengthened just by being with Jesus. The people you are really friends with, those who are closest to you – your partner, probably – often just want to be with you. You don't need to say anything or do anything, just sit with them in the same room. Why not put aside a few minutes each day to consciously be with Jesus? Just sit quietly, aware of the amazing fact that Jesus is your friend, and enjoy the fact that he is with you. You can't see him, but you may want to visualise him sitting in the chair across the room, or sense his arm round your shoulder. And enjoy the experience, enjoy the fact that you are sitting with the King of kings, the Saviour of the world. Maybe there's something he's said to you through what you've read in the Bible that morning that you simply want

to ponder, or a line of a hymn that you can enjoy as you realise the full implications of it for you. You might simply want to hold a few words from the Lord's Prayer in your mind as you sit there. Don't feel guilty that you appear not to be doing anything. And don't feel it's a waste of time (American author Marva Dawn describes worship as "*A Royal Waste Of Time*") if at the end of your time nothing seems to have happened. You will have put down your roots just a little bit deeper into that relationship.

And you know what happens if you do have a really, really good friend? He or she really affects your life in every way. You want to spend time with them and you find that the things they say or do often crop up in your conversation with others. If you really start to get friendly with Jesus, not only will you want to do what he asks you to, but you'll also find that other people notice how close you are to him. You will start to "*bear fruit*". In other words, your relationship with Jesus, rooted in the Bible, in the tradition of others, in prayer and in conscious acknowledgement of your friendship with him, will mean that you start to notice your passion for him growing. And because he's a good friend you want to grow closer to, you'll start acting as he does, doing the things he does and that he asks you to do, living a life that reflects something of his love to those around you.

In all of this, never, ever forget that Jesus chose you. He wants to be your friend. He made the first move as he reached out to you with his love – a love demonstrated by his willingness to die for you (v13). And he will stick with you. He'll be there even when you are so busy you've forgotten him, even when you're so close to the end of your tether that no-one else seems to be able to help. And if you start to think about those things, to reflect on them, ponder them, you'll begin to realise just what an amazing relationship this is. You won't need to go on courses about telling other people the good news of Jesus, you'll be living your life in such a way that it's obvious something's going on in there. I've quoted this before on many occasions, but for me, one of the greatest verses on evangelism in the whole Bible is in the Old Testament, tucked away in the sticky pages of the Minor Prophets – in *Zechariah 8:23*:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you."'

Let other people see just how much you are enjoying your friendship with Jesus, your blessing by him, and then you might indeed find them asking what it's all about and wanting some of it for themselves.

Put down your roots into that relationship with Jesus and start living a life that matters, a life that finds your identity in him.

"WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?"

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John 15:1-17; Psalm 1

If we are to live lives that truly demonstrate our identity in Jesus, we need to have **ROOTS** and a **RELATIONSHIP**. In *Psalm 1* we read that the true person of God is like a tree planted by a stream of water, putting its roots down into the water and growing healthy and strong because of that. Jesus, speaking to his disciples in *John 15*, likens his followers to branches of a vine. The important idea is that of **ROOTS**, of being connected into the network of good things that can nourish and nurture us in our growth and activity as followers of Jesus. Those roots go in several directions for us as Christians – and they're all important for us if we are to be able to live as God wants us to.

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And those roots need to go down, too, into the **TRADITION** of Christianity. It doesn't replace the Bible, nor, indeed, does it really have the same authority and power, but it can certainly help. And that's what we're about when we put our roots down into the collective wisdom and practice of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We also need to ensure we have roots in a **RELATIONSHIP** with Jesus. Jesus here talks about his disciples being his "*friends*" (*vv14,15*), an organic relationship, a deep and integral part of our discipleship. The picture Jesus uses is that of a vine.

But how can we "*remain*" or "*abide*" in him? Well, the first thing is to recognise what we've already said: we are **FRIENDS** with him. We need consciously to acknowledge that, to keep telling ourselves that we have been drawn into friendship with him. And what's even more wonderful than being friends with the Son of God himself is that he has actually chosen us to be his friends (*v16*). But that friendship has to be sustained and we can do that by talking to and listening to Jesus – again, just like any other friendship. In this context we call it **PRAYER**. It does, of course, involve talking to Jesus, but in a true friendship – and there is none truer than this one – the conversation cannot be one way all the time. We need to listen to Jesus as well. Partly we listen to him through reading the Bible. And there are times when our roots in this relationship are strengthened just by being with Jesus.

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Questions for discussion

1. What does the picture of the vine say to you about how you relate to Jesus?
2. What place does tradition have in your understanding of discipleship? How can we ensure that we are not led astray by it?
3. Do you ever think about the fact that you are a friend of Jesus? What effect does that have on you?
4. "*Just being with Jesus.*" What does that mean for you? How can we practise that discipline?
5. What would make you really passionate about Jesus? What can you do about cultivating that?