

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2022**  
**John 15:1-17**  
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**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- There are no 'silver bullets' for church revitalisation.
- In John 15 Jesus however makes it very clear as to what does brings LIFE (see John14:6):
  - as branches are to a vine, so are we to Jesus; without him we can do nothing
  - as branches of the vine, we will bear fruit if we remain in Him
  - it is to the Father's glory that we bear much fruit
  - the nutrients that produce fruit that lasts is love

I asked the band if it was okay, or I asked Eric if it was okay, if I could speak here even though they're over my shoulder. So, if I don't make as much eye contact, I apologize. And also, if you're up upstairs in the balcony wave at me if I'm not looking at you when I'm speaking.

Before I start, I want to just say, I'm here under the authority of Scott. Scott is our Teaching Elder and he permits people to speak under his authority. And also, I want to say that if there is anything that is not of the Lord, we need to let that flow away as chaff.

So, let me pray before we begin to look at God's Word:

Almighty God, we thank you that Your Word is truth and as we come to look at it now, we pray that Your Spirit might move in our hearts and that whatever the speaker may say or may have prepared, that Your Holy Spirit will speak, and if there is anything that's not of You may it be cast aside as chaff but, if there is truth, may Your sword go to the heart, I pray. Amen.

Today we're continuing to look at some of the lessons that can be taken from that book that Scott has been sharing called The Anatomy of a Revived Church. Now, as a reminder, the book draws on research that was undertaken into churches that were on the edge of death but were turned around and, for the past three weeks, we've been looking into the lessons from the research and, today, Scott has asked me to consider a particular chapter that's headed 'Seeking silver bullets no more'. Seeking silver bullets no more. Now, I wasn't sure if people knew the phrase 'silver bullets' because I grew up in New Zealand with the Lone Ranger on television and he had the silver bullets because they were better than lead bullets. But it's a metaphor. It describes a magical solution or a fix to a difficult problem. Now, given the events of the last few days, you might want to say that the Conservative party is currently looking for a silver bullet when it comes to the replacement of yet another prime minister.

No more politics! The author of the book says this 'The silver bullet syndrome is alive and well in thousands of congregations. The silver bullet sentence typically begins with 'If we only had ..... ' then the church leader or the member informs me of the magical solution that would turn their church around. He goes on, 'Hear me clearly, there are no silver bullets for churches in need of revitalization. There are no shortcuts and our

anatomy of revived churches the results were 100 percent. No successful church revitalization depended on a silver bullet. Not one!

Well, what are these supposed silver bullets that apparently don't work? What are these if we only had ....? The author of the book provides a list:

- if we only had the right kind of minister
- if we only had more money
- if we only had better music
- if we only had the right sort of building or if the building was in the right place

Now, that's the list from the book. I'm sure you've been in these conversations with people when they bring out the silver bullet question, the one fix that doesn't work. Now, the easy thing that I could do this morning is just rattle through those and tell you why they don't work. Well, that's not what I'm going to do because I figure we are done with hearing about what doesn't work.

All week we've been hammered by information about what doesn't work in the government, what doesn't work in the economy, what doesn't work in the health system, what doesn't work in our energy needs. What you don't need from me this morning is a lesson on what doesn't work in the church. Not today anyway. There's just too much negativity about. So, instead, I want to come to a passage from God's Word that is positive.

Now, I want you to open your Bibles this morning. I want you to keep your Bibles open, because, when we go on and look at this passage, I'm almost going to go through it verse by verse. There's going to be nothing complicated. So, John 15, keep it opened as we go through.

And it starts with that phrase that John and I were talking about before 'I am the true vine and my father is the gardener.'

Around Easter time, we looked at a passage from John chapter 15 when, on Palm Sunday, we were looking at Jesus coming into Jerusalem on the donkey and, back then, I took us through some of the chapters ahead of that and I suggested that it was really important that we got a grip on what Jesus said to His disciples during Holy Week, in particular, what he said to them at the Last Supper, and I tried to turn our attention to chapters 13 to 17. Flick through, flock through the Bible as we're looking at this and you'll see, you'll see where I am with this, Chapters 13 to 17 should really jump out at us.

Now, all of the Bible is important but I think Jesus was really trying to drive home to His disciples why He had come, why He was about to die and I think those chapters really need focused attention. I'm looking at Norma. I remember last time Norma when you read the Bible and you've referred to Jesus red letters about the start of it. This is like the purple patch of what Jesus is looking at from chapters 13 to 17 and here, right in the middle at chapter 15, Jesus says 'I am the vine' and He tells His disciples 'you are the branches.' Now, it's important to pause for a moment because the vine in the Hebrew

Bible, in the Old Testament, was very, very important because the Jews, the nation of Israel, its symbol was the vine. If you look at some of the ancient coinage, it's got vines on it. It's as if, for the Jews, the vine was like the thistle for people in Scotland. It was the national symbol and so, Jesus, typically radical, flips things on its head again and He says 'I am the true vine.' Now, we wouldn't get that here in Scotland but if Jesus said, bad illustration, but if Jesus says 'I'm the real thistle' then that would resonate much more with us and so, the Jews knew when he says 'I am the true vine' that he was saying something very, very radical. John wanted to get that across to us.

Now, you might be saying 'Well, what's any of this got to do with a revitalized church?' Why am I so fixated by it? Well, chapter 15 is really important and the image of the vine is very important because it's a picture of the Jesus-way. When I spoke, back in August, we looked for a moment at John chapter 14. I want you just to cast your eye on that again. Do you remember Thomas, the flummoxed disciple? Because Jesus said 'Look, I'm going to prepare a place and you know where I'm going.' and Thomas says 'We don't know where you're going.' and do you remember those words that Jesus said to Him? Can anybody? Can anybody shout them out to me – 'I am .....

Fantastic my job is done! 'I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but by me.' Now, I don't apologize for going back and going over those words again because I believe that they are at the heart of the Gospel, at the heart of the Good News and, you know, I thought it was marvelous, I thought it was marvelous that at the Queen's funeral, that was the text that she took, because the Queen planned her funeral and she took the Bible reading from that very passage, that Jesus is the way the truth and the life. That was the Queen's final message to us from the grave. And Jesus, at the Last Supper, when He gets His final chance to have a conversation with His disciples, He's sitting there and His very best shot at explaining what He was about, was this picture of the vine. 'I am the vine, you are the branches.'

Can I suggest this to you this morning? Can I suggest that you take this passage in John chapter 15 and that you make it your go-to passage, a go-to passage when you are trying to understand what Jesus is about, a go-to passage when you're speaking with others about Jesus and I urge you, in your own time, to look at this passage, to, as it were, eat it to drink it up, to learn it to study it, to mark it. It's so central and it's such a brilliant symbol of a relationship with Christ. So, all I can do in the time that I've got and all I want to do is skip through the passage. Now, it's going to be light. I don't have the time to go into it in any depth but I want to skip through some of these verses.

Verse 1. 'I am the true vine; my father is the gardener.' Jesus the vine. It's our focus but, as I tried to draw out with John, it's the father God, who is the gardener and He tends the vine and He tends the branches.

Verse 2. 'He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes.' What a picture. John lovingly tending his plants. Now, I know many people in this congregation have got green fingers and you know exactly how to bring on your vegetables and your flowers and your plants through the summer, and

you know how important it is to prune, how to make a plant flourish. That's how gardening works. Such an important picture, and it's so important that we understand that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are involved, are involved in this image of the vine.

Now, there's much that could be considered about pruning and about dead wood but I'm not going to go there today. I want to move on and I want to look at some of the positive messages that Jesus has given.

Verse 4. 'Remain in me.' Those of you that use the older versions of the Bible, you'll know that the word that comes up again and again is 'abide in me.' Remain in me. But I've underlined in this passage the number of times that that word 'remain' comes up. It's incredible. 'Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.'

Verse 5. 'I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.'

Now, you hardly need me to expand on this can. You remember back to your school biology days - what was it? - phloem and xylem going through the plant, reaching the leaves from the stems through the plant, from the branches, that's what it means to be in Christ.

Verse 5. 'Remain in me and I in you. Remain in me and you will bear much fruit.' That's Jesus asserting a fact.

But look further at the sentence. He says 'apart from me, you can do nothing.' When asked 'John, what you do with the deadwood?' he said 'Well, you burn it because it's useless.' Do you see that these are, these are incredible statements. Remain in Jesus and you will bear fruit; apart from Jesus, you can do nothing. Now, I wonder, do you believe that? Do you really believe that? Do you pray that? Oh Lord Jesus, may I remain in You and may You remain in me. Oh Lord Jesus, apart from You I can do nothing. Can you say that with conviction? Is Jesus a living vine to you? Do you believe that He sustains you and that, without Him, you can't bear any fruit, any fruit? Or is your Jesus just of the sort of stained-glass variety?

What about us as a body of God's people, as a community, as a church?

Remain in me and I in you. Without you, I can do nothing. In my Bible I've got those words underlined and I pray them most days and I remember Jesus Christ my Savior tells me 'apart from me you can do nothing.'

Now, I'm laying this on thick. I'm really laying this on thick because it's so important. Do we live that? Do we stop at each meal and say 'Thank-you Jesus'? Do we wake up in the morning and say 'Thank-you Jesus'? When we put our head on the pillow at night do we say 'Thank-you Jesus for another day.? Whether things are good or bad, whether

things are hard or easy, can you pray that? Do you believe that 'apart from me you can do nothing'?

I wonder, and I'm asking you as personally as I can, if you've never done it before, pray it tonight, pray it in the morning, better still, when you go home at lunch time, pray it as you eat your food, pray it in front of your children or your grandchildren, pray it in front of the people who are around you, if you're on your own, pray it out loud, say it out loud 'Lord Jesus, you are the vine, I am the branch. Thank-you. Thank-you for this food. Thank-you for my house. Thank-you for my clothing. Lord, I can do nothing without you. Nothing.'

I am laying it on thick because sometimes, I think, it needs to be laid on thick to ourselves. But what about as a church? What about as a collective? What about as a group of Christians here in this place? Do we really believe, collectively, that, without Jesus, we can do nothing? Or instead, are we just a distracted congregation, looking for those silver bullets, those simple solutions that take us away from what is the main thing? I wonder?

You see, I can't skip over verse six. Verse 6 says 'If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.' It burdens my heart, each Sunday, when I drive home from this place that we pass a church and that church looks dead, there is nothing happening there. It burdens my heart that there are churches in this country that are offering no hope. Sorry, that wasn't scripted.

Verse 7. 'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you.' Really?

Verse 8. 'This is to my father's glory that you bear much fruit showing yourselves to be my disciples.' Now, I haven't had a chance to talk much about fruit in this message but look at that. I think that's incredible. I think that's incredible. Let me tell you why. Let's back up a bit. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. We only produce fruit if we are in the vine, if we remain in Jesus, if we abide in Him but that fruit's not for us, fruit's not for this church. Look at verse 8 again. 'This is to my father's glory.' My father's glory. Not your glory Church. Not your glory, Brent. This is for the father's glory. Now, is that not extraordinary? The maker of the universe, the controller of time and space, takes glory from our fruit? He takes glory from our fruit? How does that work? That is almost too much for my mind to comprehend.

But, let's return to the business of what it means to remain in Christ because He explains it further verse 9, and 9 through 11 'As the father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now, remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.' Now look, there's so much in those verses that I've just read. It's a sermon in itself and then some!

But, do you see, the nutrient, the nutrient flowing through the vine to the branches is the nutrient of love and it's the nutrient of joy. 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love.'

Well, what is that command?

Verse 12. 'My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.' I hate the way the secular word is taken, the secular world has taken over the use of this word 'love' and it's become some sort of sentimental greeting card nonsense. The love of the Father to the Son and the love of the Son to the Father and the love of the Son to us, His branches, and our love to Him is central to our faith. Never let it be cheapened by what the, by what the secular world might describe love as.

Verse 12. 'Again, my command is this love each other as I have loved you.'

Now, I started by saying that there were no silver bullets, that there was no one solution for a church to be revitalized. You might, at this point, be challenging me on that, because there kinda is, that kinda is a formula in a way and it's this, that Jesus is the vine, that we are the branches, if we remain in Him then there is fruit but it requires obedience.

Skipping all over the place but verse 17. 'This is my command' if you take nothing out the door today, take these three words, right at the end of verse 17 'love each other.'

My challenge to you is, get hold of John 15 and make it your go-to passage. Make it your go-to passage, to remain in Jesus, abide with me, remain in me.

Let's sing that out. Let's tell out our soul. Let's be, let's be led in that final hymn as we sing that now. Amen