**Sunday 28 April – Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**The Collect**

Almighty God,

who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ

have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:

grant that, as by your grace going before us

you put into our minds good desires,

so by your continual help

we may bring them to good effect;

through Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.

**First Reading: Acts 8:26-40**

26An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) 27So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ 31He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:
 ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
 and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
 so he does not open his mouth.
 33In his humiliation justice was denied him.
 Who can describe his generation?
 For his life is taken away from the earth.’
34The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

**Psalm 22:25-31**

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; \*

I will perform my vows in the presence of those that fear you.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied; \*

those who seek the Lord shall praise him; their hearts shall live for ever.

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, \*

and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

For the kingdom is the Lord’s \*and he rules over the nations.

How can those who sleep in the earth bow down in worship, \*

or those who go down to the dust kneel before him?

He has saved my life for himself; my descendants shall serve him; \*

this shall be told of the Lord for generations to come.

They shall come and make known his salvation, to a people yet unborn, \*

declaring that he, the Lord, has done it.

**Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21**

7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**Gospel: John 15:1-8**

Jesus said to his disciples: 1‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide 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. 5I 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. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.’

**Sermon by Christine Newmarch**

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at* [*Sermons (tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*](http://www.tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk/sermons.html)

If you have a garden, or even a few plants in tubs or window boxes, I wonder if you are up to date with pruning? It’s time to deadhead daffodils, and sadly most of my tulips are past their best. Even indoor miniature roses need attention.

I have my little guide book, but deciding what to prune, how and when, can seem a daunting. At least, it does to me!

And then there’s the grapevine. I wonder if anyone here grows grapes? They do need to be pruned carefully, don’t they?

Jesus had most probably seen plenty of grapevines as he walked through the Judean countryside from one village to another. The chances are some had been better pruned than others and he had seen the consequences. The fruitful years after careful pruning, and the disappointing years when pruning was not so well done.

The image of the vine is often used in the Bible to represent Israel. It often describes a bad vine, bearing no fruit.

Psalm 80 describes a vine being brought out of Egypt; Hosea refers to Israel as ‘a spreading vine’; Isaiah contains a ‘Song of the Vineyard’ in which God cares for the vine but only receives bad grapes in return.

Ezekeil describes Jerusalem as a ‘useless vine.’

By contrast, Jesus tells us that he is the true vine.

It is no accident that Jesus says ‘I am the true vine’ just as he had said earlier in this his last discourse on the night before his arrest.

In the Old Testament, God had told Moses ‘My name is “I am”. Tell the people that “I am” sent you.’

So whenever Jesus said, ‘I am’ – and there are 7 ‘I am’ sayings recorded in John - he was claiming to be one with God the Father.

Jesus, the good vine would bear good fruit.

What does Jesus mean in this figurative language by good fruit? St Paul answers that when he describes the fruit of the spirit as the qualities of good character: love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Jesus, the good vine bears good fruit, but it depends on us being branches of his vine, and on pruning.

Branches that bear no fruit waste the energy of the vine, and are no use. You notice that Jesus is not talking about deadwood, but any branch not bearing fruit.

The thing about pruning is that to be effective, it means cutting into a living part of the plant. So, for Jesus, the true vine, any pruning would be painful.

If we are not fruitful, it pains his loving heart, but he promises that all those who abide in him, will be fruitful. Abiding is a word we tend not to use in everyday conversation. It is about more than just living, more of an indwelling, being caught up in Jesus’ very being, with a sense of belonging and conforming.

But notice also that fruitful branches are pruned too, to make them bear more fruit. Perhaps that pruning is the discomfort, the pain, the sacrifice that being a Christian can bring. What might that be? Well, anything from spending time in prayer and worship when others are shopping or gardening, foregoing potential pleasures to absolute rejection and persecution.

We are inextricably linked to Jesus, the true vine, as we abide in him, and by allowing ourselves to be pruned back, we become ever more Christ-like.

So what does all this mean for us today? Should we go home and prune our grapevines right away? Yes, we probably should, if we have not done it already, and it is on my to-do list! But what else?

Are we to look out for someone reading the Bible out loud with the car window down in a traffic jam, and leap in alongside them? Well, probably not.

But we can see from the account of Philip and the Ethiopian court official that God wishes us to welcome people who are different from us, and help them to understand the scriptures. The Ethiopian official, would most likely have been a black man, a convert to Judaism who, as a eunuch, would have been considered unclean and been excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, and was travelling on the wilderness road, well away from other people. Yet he was a man longing to understand more about God.

Philip in the power of the Holy Spirit was able to interpret part of the Suffering Servant narrative from Isaiah in the context of Jesus’ suffering, his death and resurrection. Through the impromptu roadside baptism, the Ethiopian was grafted into the true vine, just as Philip had been, and as we have been through our baptism.

Our calling, our pattern of growth within the true vine will differ from Philip’s, and indeed most likely from each other’s, but let us through prayer and reflection let the Spirit guide us, so that those we encounter can experience the healing, joy and love which only Jesus can bring to this broken world. Amen.

**Prayers written by Frank Le Poidevin**

Heavenly Father, we pray for your church worldwide: for archbishops, bishops and all who hold positions of authority in the church; for all priests, ministers and teachers, and all who seek to spread abroad your gospel of love and truth. Reveal yourself to us in all your glory and enable us through the power of the Holy Spirit so to order our lives that we reflect your goodness and love wherever we go and whoever we meet.

Heavenly Father, we pray for our country: for our king and members of the royal family; for the prime minister and members of parliament; and for all who are set in authority over us.

We give thanks for the freedom which we enjoy: the freedom of speech, of action and of self-determination.

We pray for those in many parts of the world who are oppressed and who lack any kind of freedom, who live in fear and insecurity. We pray that the leaders of all nations may set aside their personal ambitions and greed and seek instead to rule with wisdom, integrity, and justice for all.

We pray for a peaceful and lasting solution to the problems besetting many nations today.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all who suffer in any way: for the homeless and those without work; for the aged and lonely, the heartbroken, the unloved, the downtrodden.

We give thanks for those, including surgeons, doctors, nurses and care workers, whose lives are devoted to the service of others; who heal the sick and relieve mental suffering, who teach with devotion and skill, who care for the hungry, the homeless and the refugee.

Strengthen and encourage all who give themselves, selflessly, to helping those in need.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all who are ill or in pain, especially those who have no-one to confide in, no-one to listen to them. We pray for your love to enfold them, your peace to calm them, your healing power to transform them.

We pray for those of our number who are ill, including Alfred Johnson - and those known only to us.

Heavenly Father, we commend to your love and mercy those who have died to this earthly life, including Beryl Brand and June Harris.

We pray for your comfort and supporting love for their families and friends.

From our memorial book we remember and give thanks for the lives of: John Musselwhite; Robert Guest; Mary Corner.

Heavenly Father, may your words of truth take root in our hearts and grow to rich maturity.

May we hear your will for us and act upon it.

May we encourage and nurture one another in faith so that we can go out strong in our weakness and littleness.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers

for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.