



Looking Inwards (15 mins)
Caring For Each Other

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins)
Concern For Others

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?

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The Last Words Of Jesus
HG124: You Are The Branches

John 15:1-17

Home Group Study Notes

12 June 2016 - Revd Margaret Fowler



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION BEFORE THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

We have just celebrated the Queens 'Official' 90th Birthday (11th June). What does the Queen mean to you either personally or as a Head of State?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



The Last Words Of Jesus HG124: You Are The Branches

John 15:1-17

Home Group Sermon Notes

12 June 2016 - Revd Margaret Fowler

I'm sure some of you will know students who at the moment are having exams - GCSEs, AS levels, A-Levels, University exams. It's that time of year. In these final weeks they need to make sure all their course work is completed, and most of all they need to listen attentively to the final advice their tutors are giving them. Tutors will all be encouraging their students through this final period of learning because they want the students to do their very best of course and get the highest grades possible so that they can go out into the world and do well.

And this is similar to what Jesus has been doing with the disciples as he summarises what he has been teaching them for the past three years. They have done all the course work, they've done all the practical stuff. The disciples have listened to Jesus teach, they have watched him heal the sick, and then he sent them out like first year apprentices, to preach the Kingdom of God, to heal the sick and cast out demons. But along the way many would-be disciples found the teaching of Jesus too difficult and they fell away.

The training of these few carefully chosen disciples is coming to a close because in a few days Jesus will be arrested and crucified and the disciples will be on their own. Just as exam students will leave their tutors at the door to the exam room, in future Jesus will not be with them in person. So Jesus is now going over the key elements of true discipleship so that when the testing time of his arrest and Crucifixion comes, he is as sure as He can be that they are fully equipped for ministry and won't fall away like many others did. Jesus is preparing His students who will go on to build His Church.

At the end of v14 Jesus says to the disciples, "*Come let us leave*". They left the place where Jesus and the disciples ate the last supper and went on their way to Gethsemane most likely arriving in a garden valley where there were many grapevines. Jesus, as we know, often preached from the agricultural imagery around him, so we can well imagine that this was what was happening here, and surrounded by grape vines he uses the metaphor of the vine as a teaching aid.

We see before us a healthy vine. Jesus is clear right from the outset of his teaching. **Jesus** is the Vine, **His Father** is the gardener, **we** are the branches. And he's also very clear about the quality of the fruit because a top quality vine will produce top quality fruit, but a poor quality vine will produce poor quality fruit; and if the branches are dis-

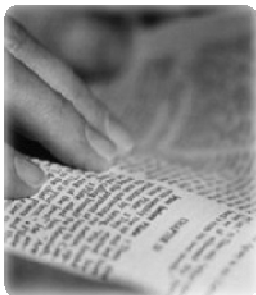
4: Are there any areas of your personal life or your Church life which are not working well and may need pruning?

5: What does friendship with God mean?

6: What is the difference between being a servant and a friend?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Is our commitment to stay connected to vine as strong as it once was?

2: What does “connected to the vine” look like for me personally and for us as a Church?

3: Do you have any story to share about someone’s sacrificial love for you which attracted you to Christ?

eased there will be no fruit at all. Unless, as believers in Jesus, we stay vitally connected to Him the quality of our fruitfulness in ministry, will be poor or non-existent. We may get away with being disconnected for a while, but eventually our fruitfulness will fail.

So this first part of the reading challenges us: Is our commitment to stay connected to vine as strong as it once was? What does “connected to the vine” look like for us?

There’s also a picture in this vine metaphor image of what God the Gardener will do if the vine produces no good fruit because He will come along regularly and inspect the branches and the fruit, and if He finds the branches have got out of control and lost their connection to the Vine, He will cut out and burn those branches that are not of good quality and producing no fruit.

My husband hates roses in the garden. He said that as a boy the thorns on roses always burst his footballs. Consequently, we’ve never grown any roses until a few years ago my eldest son bought me a small rose bush for Mother’s Day - the rose was called “My Mum”. Well, I had to plant it but because I had never looked after roses I never pruned it and each year the roses became straggly and were always covered in greenfly. So last year I finally read up about roses and pruned it almost back to the ground, and sure enough earlier this year tiny new shoots appeared and it now looks green and healthy with some lovely roses growing on it. So pruning is a positive thing to do, not a negative one.

Pruning then is what God will do if believers and ministries are not remaining connected to the vine and producing good quality fruit for the kingdom. If a particular ministry isn’t going well and everything you try doesn’t work, then maybe it’s time to stop what you’re doing and seek God for new direction. Stopping something that isn’t working **is** an option. And just to be clear, Jesus is not talking here about cutting off his disciples completely and disconnecting them from God, rather he is talking about pruning the branches because God the Gardener knows pruning is the only way to enable new shoots of ministry to appear elsewhere.

In the Old Testament there are several passages about God’s vineyard: In Isaiah 5 the prophet was mourning the condition of God’s vineyard, the nation of Israel. God planted Israel. God the Gardener tilled the soil of Israel. He built a wall around the vineyard, His people, and yet the vineyard, Israel, produced such bad fruit that God trampled it down.

In Ezekiel 15 the prophet asks the question: “*What good is dry and dead grape wood except to be thrown into the fire as kindling?*” You can build a house out of oak, but who would even bother making a peg out of the dead and dry wood of a grapevine? The implication here is that Israel was more dead than alive. She was planted to bear fruit, but she had wandered far from God and had become fruitless. Judgment was, therefore, on the way.

No doubt, the first disciples would have understood that when Jesus was talking to them about the Vine and the Branches, He was referring to these Old Testament passages.

It's a sobering thought what will happen to us if as a Church or as individual believers we become unfruitful because we do not stay connected to the Vine. The building of God's Church depends on us and our union with Christ. If we become infected by sin or extravagance, God will be forced to prune us back hard just as He did Israel.

Each of us need to work out for ourselves how we stay close to Jesus day by day so that we do bear fruit for the Kingdom and bring glory to God. So how do we remain in the vine and bear good fruit? A good place to go when talking about fruitful living in Christ is Galatians 5:22-23: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control*" Paul here contrasts the fruit of the Spirit against the acts of the sinful nature. These fruits speak for themselves — when we live inner Godly lives, fruit will be the outward result.

Look also at Titus 3:14: *Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives*" and Ephesians 2:10: "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

Fruit comes from the right orientation and right actions of the heart. Christ calls us not to focus on a life of "no" but to a life of "yes" - of fruit bearing. One of the reasons people say they don't want to become Christian is because they think it's a life of "*thou shalt not*", but the Christian life is a calling to "thou shalt" or "you will". "*You shall not kill*" because you are called to honour the image of God in your fellow humans. "*You shall not commit adultery*" because you will, through the quality of your marriage, give the world a picture of God's love for his people. "*You shall not covet*" because you will be able to recognise all the blessings he's already given you. By obeying God's commandments, particularly the commandment of love, we will bear fruit and experience great joy.

And it's to this teaching of love which Jesus now turns in the latter part of this passage that we're going to look now - love for Jesus and love for one another. Jesus says in v 9: "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now **remain** in my love*". Any teacher or preacher will tell you how repeating words helps to get the message across, and Jesus used the word "*remain*" no less than 11 times in 10 verses! So we are left in no doubt by Jesus about the importance of this word "*remain*" - which means "to stay" or "to abide", "don't move away from". First Jesus says, "remain in me", and secondly, "remain in my love". Love is what unites a disciple to Jesus, just as branches are united to the vine.

I think if I asked any of you what attracted you to Christianity, "the love you saw in Christians" might be somewhere near the top of the list. I know it was for me. As a little girl we moved house a lot and I often had to make new friends. My mother sent me to Sunday School and I also joined uniformed groups so that I could get to know other children. It was those Sunday School teachers and leaders who were always so kind and I knew I felt safe and contented when I was with them. I always enjoyed hearing their stories about Jesus. The love **they** showed attracted me to Jesus.

And when I finally gave my life to Christ I was the fruit of the love they and others had shown to me. In v 11 Jesus explains why he wants us to **remain** in His love "*I have told you this so that **my joy** may be in you and that **your joy** may be complete*".

I read this in Philip Yancey (*What's So Amazing about Grace?*): "*Not long ago I received in the mail a postcard from a friend that had on it only six words, "I am the one Jesus loves." I smiled when I saw the return address, for my strange friend excels at these pious slogans. When I called him, though, he told me the slogan came from the author and speaker Brennan Manning. At a seminar, Manning referred to Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, he would reply 'I am the one Jesus loves.'*"

I can say "*I, Margaret, am the one Jesus loves*". You can say it inserting your own name "*I, ?????, am the one Jesus loves*". Our primary identity is that we are loved by Jesus and that knowledge makes our joy complete. But just when we think we've grasped these lessons, the teaching becomes a bit like that old Jimmy Cricket slogan: "*And there's more!*" And here is the "more": "*My command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*".

If "*I am the one Jesus loves*", and Jesus died for me, then I am not only loved by Jesus and love Jesus in return, but I must be prepared to lay down my lives for the love of others.

Loving one another with a sacrificial love is probably the hardest part of the lesson from this text, but it's what Christ calls us to - "*Love one another as I have loved you*".

The future of the disciples' work amongst others would depend on their love for one another. They needed to love one another in order to be able to work together and to grow the Kingdom. If the Sunday School teachers and uniformed group leaders had been unkind to me and to each another, I might never have given Christianity another thought.

Finally, Jesus says to his disciples: "*You did not choose me, but I chose you ...*"

In His grace, Jesus called the first disciples and they followed Him. He also called you and me and chose us to be His friends. We are God's chosen and loved people. For us there is no A-Level exam to pass to enter the Kingdom of God, there is no grading system, and with Jesus we cannot fail. He loves us just as we are and we must love Him in return. We are His loved disciples; we are that funny mixed bunch of people that God has chosen to build his Church.

All He asks of us is that we:

- Remain connected to Jesus
- We remain in the love of Jesus
- We love one another sacrificially, just like Jesus.