

(Acts 8:26-end; 1 John 4:7-end; John 15:1-8)

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

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

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Now then, let me show you *this* book. It's a guidebook to Richmond Castle: I found it when I was unpacking the alarmingly large number of boxes that came up with me from down south. In fact, this book has been in the Fletcher family for a very long time: it was printed in 1961 which is when my parents moved to Kirby Hill and has survived many house-moves since. Perhaps I kept it because somehow I knew that one day it would come in handy!

Of course, dating back fifty-seven years, it is a little out of date – but not all of it by any means. The historical information is as valid now as it was then, and I am intrigued by its claim that Richmond Castle boasts one of the best examples of Norman masonry amongst all the castles of England.

But the book's introduction *is* way out of date! It says, 'Richmond ... a short distance west of the Great North Road ... is the terminus of a branch railway line from Darlington...' Indeed, I have read somewhere else that the importance of Richmond meant that connecting it into the developing national railway network was an early priority – as was not harming the town aesthetically in the process.

Whilst I have not yet had time to visit the Castle, I have been to The Station, now used along many 'new lines'. To get there I crossed 'Station Bridge' (or should that be 'Mercury Bridge?!') – specially built to connect the station to the town and which was once adorned with pinnacles carrying gas lights! I have also been along the lovely walk to Easby Abbey – *above* ground, of course! – coming across the stone which marks the point at which the 'drummer boy' is said to have been last heard in the tunnel below. That tunnel is supposed to have connected the Abbey and the Castle.

And I have spent a good deal of time in this church building – as well as St Michael’s and St Edmund’s. I note that Richmond’s parish church was built outside the castle’s exclusive outer bailey, so that for almost 900 years it has truly been the ‘people’s church’.

So have you spotted the theme running through my first impressions of the history of our town? Yes, it’s connecting those on the ‘inside’ with those on the ‘outside’. If the castle and its associated precincts were for those on the ‘inside’ then in different ways railways and tunnels and bridges and churches were all a means for connection with those on the ‘outside’.

And that’s our job, too. This church and the churches in Downholme and Marske are to be meeting places, places where people can connect with each other and with God. But a church is so much more than a building: the churches of our benefice are made up of *living* stones, that is, you and me.

Just as building a branch railway line to Richmond was considered a priority so we must prioritise building the equivalent of branch lines reaching out to the people around us. If Richmond was regarded as important enough to make the effort to reach, surely the people around us not yet aware of God’s infinite love for them are even more important.

In our gospel reading today we heard Jesus say, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’. When we reach out to others, then, we can be sure that he will guide us and empower us. This is underlined by the elegant statement from today’s second reading, written also by John: ‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’. That statement features in the Church of England’s Marriage Service, and we will no doubt hear it at next month’s royal wedding! If it is the case that wherever we see love we see God, then our hope is that others will be able to see God in the loving service extended to them by his Church.

In our first bible passage today, from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard about the Ethiopian man who was reading from the book of Isaiah. He was reading without understanding: he needed someone to explain God’s word to him. Philip was ‘guided and empowered’ to do just that, with the result that the Ethiopian asked to be baptised. Our job is to be like Philip, to draw alongside people and open up God’s word to them. Remember Bishop Nick’s message to us last Thursday evening: remember that we must ‘read, mark and inwardly digest’ God’s holy word in order for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled. Jesus said, ‘If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.’

Remember too that in baptism we become a ‘new creation’ – we become ‘in Christ’; that is, we abide in him. It is precisely because we are ‘in Christ’ that the image of Christ as the vine and we the branches rings true.

Elsewhere in the book of Isaiah, there is this beautiful passage – often used during the season of Advent: ‘A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a *branch* shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might...’

You know that passage; you know it was actually referring to the way the long-awaited Messiah – the second King David, son of Jesse – would emerge from the vulnerability of the beleaguered chosen people of God. And you know that those same characteristics of wisdom and understanding which Jesus displayed are offered to us by the same Holy Spirit with which he was filled.

Jesus said, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’. In him we are deeply rooted, and in his name we reach out to others in loving service.

Now I can’t mention Jesus, ‘son of [King] David’, without also mentioning the newly arrived fifth-in-line to the throne! Louis Arthur Charles’ father William is of course named after the French king whose conquests started the whole sequence of events which have led to Richmond being to town it is today. Time will tell whether the name Louis will become as popular a ‘French import’ as William!

In my letter for the May issue of the parish magazine I have mentioned that God calls us all *by name* to become fully ourselves. So rejoice in *your* Christian name, and rejoice in the richness of the unconditional love in which you are held by the God of love. As the old song goes, ‘if you know God’s love then show God’s love’. Let’s reach out, then – *branch* out – in loving service to those around us, so that they too may know for themselves what it is to be connected to God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.