

Thought for the Week: "I AM the Vine, you are the branches:" the myth of independent living" - (John 15:1-8):



From the very beginning of the Bible (Genesis ch 2) to the very end (Revelation ch 22), the "Tree of Life" plays an important role and provides a powerful symbol of a 'good' way to live life consistently throughout the Bible. In Genesis, the Tree of Life, along with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, lie at the centre of the Garden. Interestingly, God does not forbid Adam and Eve from eating of it, only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sadly, we, being the creatures that we are, whether because of wanting what we are told we cannot have or because we recognised the "Knowledge of Good and Evil" was a pathway to independence and thereby to power, we went after the wrong tree, and we have been going after the 'wrong tree' pretty much ever since.

We can see this being played out if we focus in on the image of the Vine itself in Scripture. In the Psalms (Psalm 80) Israel, as God's people, are described as "the Vine," which "God brought out of Egypt, cleared the land, and planted with affection, and where it took deep root." Hosea ch 10, says pretty much the same thing, "Israel is a luxuriant Vine that yields abundant fruit."

Unfortunately, elsewhere in the Bible the image of the Vine is less positive. In many of the words of the prophets, (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel in particular) the Vine's determination to go its 'own way,' do its 'own thing,' results in God's sadness, even an image of God's judgement on Israel. Jeremiah ch 2 captures the mood pretty well, "I planted you as a choice vine," says God of Israel, "from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21)

So, the image of the Vine can represent both, the fruit of life, the epitome of what humanity is called to be from the "Tree of Life" (as mentioned in Genesis 2). And also, at the same time the Vine can also represent the Judgement and reality of what it is like if we go our own way, follow our 'own' path, and so "eat from the tree of the 'Knowledge of Good and Evil.'" What we discover, according to the Prophets, is that the fruit of such a striving for independence is considered to be like "wild grapes" in comparison to the "luxuriant grapes" of God's provision, and of living lives of inter-dependence.

Yet, particularly in our Western culture, and following the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment, this clamour for independence has been promoted almost without question fuelled in the main by consumerism and business. Everyone was sold the idea that we needed a car so that we could be "independent" so 'out of town' shopping areas were created, which could be built on lower cost land, and so everyone needed a car to get to them. So now modern housing developments have real issues with car parking where families have not one, or even two, but sometimes three or even four vehicles. Similar issues exist with food shopping and with the leisure industry such as cinemas etc. And, of course, there are many, many other similar negative self-fulfilling examples.

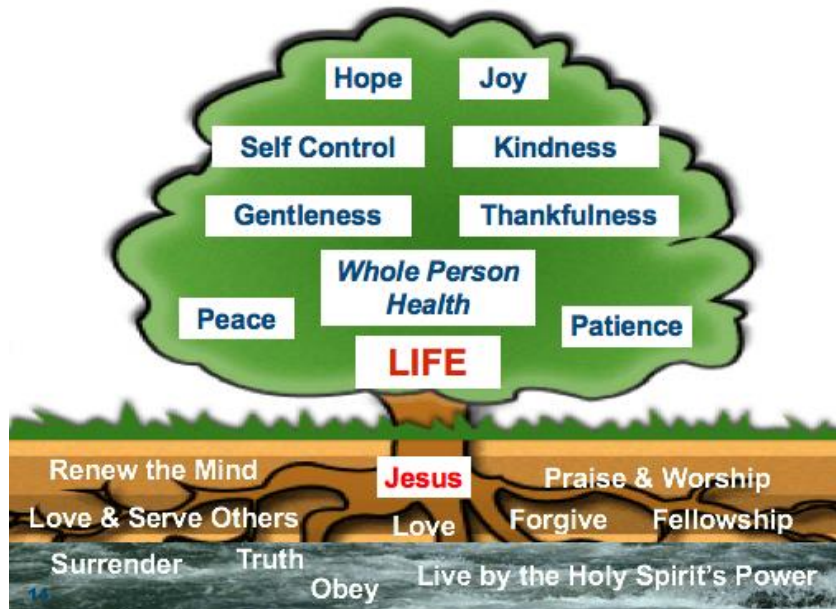
We are told we should strive to be independent, just look at the number of people driving into Bristol on their own, even post Lockdown, in the mornings on the A370 or the A38. And yet people are saying they struggle with loneliness. So, why not catch the bus?

As someone who has not been able to drive this last month because of being on crutches, it has been a real challenge, not just practically, but in terms of challenging this cultural independent model that I too have been sold. I have found it both hard to ask for if anyone is free to give me a lift (“I don’t want to be a nuisance to anyone”) and yet at the same time I’ve had some really great conversations with people as they have driven me around, especially the days after Easter when I went out to see various people for Home Communion, catching up as we drove, deepening friendships etc (behind a mask and being very careful of course). In many ways, it made the whole experience of those days much more relational and enjoyable.

But the question still begs itself, when my leg is better, when I’m able to be independent again, what then will I/we do – go back to going out on Home Communion on my own, or take the risk of asking those who maybe came out before if they would wish to repeat the experience and so continue the conversation?

This small, almost insignificant example can repeat itself though almost across the whole piece and in a myriad of different ways. The diagram below is another depiction of the “Tree of Life” this time with the gifts or ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (from Galatians ch 6) in the branches. The trunk is Jesus, just as in the Vine image of John 15, and the roots then represent where the trunk and the branches and the fruit get their nutrients and goodness from strange words like, “surrender,” “obedience,” “service,” “forgiveness,” and “praise and worship.”

Such words and ideas are totally counter-cultural to our modern “consumerist” thinking, but for those who have been either forced because of circumstance, or because of choice or events to engage in such patterns of life, rather than being life draining, people have discovered they are incredibly life-giving.



This is the upside down-ness, (or right way up-ness, depending on how you look

at it) of the Beatitudes, Jesus’ great wisdom teaching as part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt ch 5). “Blessed are the meek” for instance, says Jesus, “for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). Well, no, it’s surely the powerful who “inherit the earth” isn’t it? Hasn’t Jesus got it wrong? Well, maybe if we think ‘inheritance’ is about ‘owning.’ One of my favourite views, leg issues aside, is to climb up right to the top of Rowborough Warren. From the top you can see up the Severn past both bridges on a clear day, across to Wales, and then down past Highbridge to Hinkley. Fabulous. But I can’t “own” any of it. All I can do is receive it as ‘gift.’ Meekness is the willingness to become ‘small enough,’ vulnerable enough, to be open to the gift and therefore to the ‘givenness’ and wonder of this most beautiful of ‘cathedrals.’ If all I’m thinking about when I get to the top is, “I can’t wait to get down again because of all the things I’ve got to do, such as cutting my own grass or washing my own car,” see how small my ‘grapes’ have become; how small my world is.

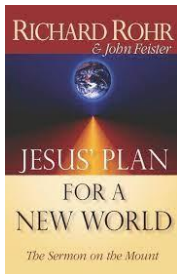
Same with worship and Church services. If all I am doing when I go to Church physically, or when I join online, is sit there thinking, “I wonder if they are going to play hymns and songs that ‘I like,’ today,” or, “I wonder who’s preaching, and whether it will be any good?” “or, if it will go on too

long” or whatever, I’m really thinking only about what best meets my ‘needs,’ my ‘wants,’ not perhaps God at all.

As I was reminded of only recently when talking with someone, back twenty years plus ago I had a wonderful lecturer at University Sister Mary Charles-Murray, a Catholic nun of an educational order. She was slight in stature but in her field was a giant. She had lectured at the National Gallery in London on art, had been asked to speak both at Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral. And yet each morning, at 7.00am she would go down to the Catholic Cathedral in Nottingham and share in the Mass often led by an elderly priest well past his ‘sell-by-date.’ And yet, as someone who occasionally used to attend Mass with her, I would see Sister Mary Charles actively and earnestly seek to try and find something of God in either the ‘homily,’ or the Bible reading, or the Communion, or the essay of her student, or in the encounter she had with a stranger, or literally whatever came her way that day.

Her whole life, in the process, became an ‘Act of Worship and Praise,’ wherever she was, not just in a Church for an hour on a Sunday, or even for half an hour at 7.00am during weekdays, but in a deep inter-dependence between herself, her Lord, her world and those around her, every day. Sister Mary Charles taught me, true worship is about a ‘givenness’ to worship and to God, not simply what “I may get out of it.”

How much this can be true of so many other aspects of life. Again, we can perhaps reflect and think through our own stories and find our own examples, positively and negatively. But as we remember “Jesus the true Vine” this week (the Bible reading in Church - John 15:1-8) maybe we could also try to hear His call: “what Tree in the Garden do we most want to eat from? And how much do we walk the way of society’s fixation with independence, popularity and ‘consumerism’ and so ‘bark up the wrong tree’ so to speak?”



Maybe, as we emerge from this pandemic we can try to listen to a different voice.

Matt Thomson

N.B. For a full list of the Beatitudes – see Matthew’s Gospel ch 5:1-12. If you would like to explore further as their meaning and implication, Richard Rohr’s Book, “Jesus’ Plan for a new world” is very helpful, especially the second half.

‘Physical’ Church worship in Congresbury next Sunday 9th May

We have now adopted “physical” worship again, alongside and integrated with “online” worship, in what we call “Hybrid Church.”

Thank you for bearing with us as we work out a few kinks in the technology, but we hope that the amalgamation of both physical and online will be a blessing to those who wish to join us in church and those who have enjoyed worshipping with us online and would like to continue to do so.

The service on the 9th May will be in Congresbury, then continuing to alternate, week by week, with Banwell. All COVID regulations as previously laid out must be strictly adhered to. If anyone needs any assistance, please speak to one of the wardens in either Church.



Home Communion:

Just to say, although we visited many people over the Easter period with a very simple Home Communion (often on the doorstep, and in the form of bread only) we are conscious that there may well be others out there for whom this may be either something that be a good 'bridge' and 'way in' to physical Church either for the first time or for the first time in a long time.



If you would like to discuss this further or would like to arrange for a Home Communion, then please contact either myself or Andrea Lowe (Administrator). Matt 0797 0140064

Andrea can be contacted at the New Creation Church Office 01934 833126 – and this number has an answer machine so we will get back to you.

Matt Thomson

Discipleship and Journeying with God:



Living Faith-The Chosen, looking at the worldwide phenomenon series examining the life and ministry of Jesus and His followers continues Monday evenings at 7.30pm. If you would like to join us, PLEASE contact Kirsty Bowles (Lay Pioneer Minister) email: kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk or **07871 513151** to get the code for the Zoom meeting.



Or you can watch the series (now on Series 2!) available via The Chosen App or on YouTube in your own time.

Rule of Life Group starts again 5th May via Zoom at 7.30pm

We are excited to be looking at Bill and Kristi's latest book (and accompanying course) called Journey of the Soul (JOTS for short), available on Amazon and other booksellers. We see a healthy Rule of life as one of continuing spiritual, emotional, and relational growth.

With Scripture, self-assessments, and soul care practices to support our progress along the way, we will engage this insightful and inspiring course (lasting six weeks) to help us all in following the Lord Jesus on an adventure of spiritual growth and transformation. In the weeks to come as we read, pray, and participate in the group, we know that all who join us on this journey will make wonderful discoveries about authentic discipleship to Jesus that fosters lasting emotional and spiritual growth.

This is a stand-alone course lasting six weeks via Zoom every Wednesday evening at 7.30 starting Wednesday 5th May. Even if you have not joined any of the previous Rule of Life sessions, we very much hope you will consider coming with us on this pilgrimage of faith. Please email ianstocker17@gmail.com or nick@jarrett-kerr.com for further details.

NEW Daily Blog – The Holy Spirit Seminar

This Tuesday, 4th May, we begin a new chapter in the life of the daily blog. As we approach Ascension and Pentecost, we will be spending some time looking at the 'Person' of the Holy Spirit, through a course based on the work of American theological scholar Barry Davis.

If you would like to look at the source material that the course is based on, Davis' book 'The Holy Spirit', is available from Amazon as a paperback or an ebook download.

