

# Remain in Me

Adrian D. Van Breda  
Sermon prepared for **10 May 2009**

Reading: **John 15:1-8**  
Theme: "*Remain in Christ, the true vine*"

"I am the vine, you are the branches, and my father is the gardener." Wonderful words from Jesus! "I am the vine, you are the branches, and my father is the gardener." This is one of a collection of "I am" sayings by Jesus, scattered through the Gospel of John. I am the bread of life; I am the living bread come down from heaven; I am the gate for the sheep; I am the good shepherd; I am the light of the world; I am the way and the truth and the life; I am the resurrection and the life; and the one that caused such a stir – Before Abraham was, I am.

In these "I am" sayings Jesus use metaphors to reveal who he is in a way that is rich and creative and deep. We learn a lot about who he is in the world and about our relationship with him and about ourselves through these sayings. The metaphor of the vine that we hear in John 15 has a long and rich tradition in scripture.

In the Old Testament Israel was associated with the vine or the vineyard, and God was seen as the gardener or caretaker of the vineyard. Listen, for example, to this poem from Isaiah 5:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.

Isn't that amazing? Imagine if God referred to us as the garden of his delight!

Of course, this image of the vine also has a rich tradition in the New Testament. The vine produces grapes from which we make wine, which becomes the blood of Christ; the fruit of the vine becomes for us the cup of salvation. So when Jesus said that he is the vine, he was speaking into a wonderful history and vision of the vineyard.

Everyone had vines – they grew up the sides of houses and on the fields around the Middle East. I was in Cape Town two weeks ago and spent a couple of days on a wine estate, Zevenwacht, for a conference. All around the conference venue were trellised vines. Of course, the grapes had already been harvested, but the leaves of the vines were turning orange and red, getting ready to go dormant for the winter. I was reminded of the vitality and life that vineyards represent, particularly for Capetonians like me.

There is such richness in today's text. I could talk about it for hours. But I won't. I'll try to stick to my 15 minutes! Sometimes as a preacher you have to really scratch for something to say, but today the problem is not what to say but rather what to leave out!

I want us to reflect on just one key feature of this text, and that is the first phrase: I am the *true* vine. In most of the I am sayings, Jesus qualifies the metaphor. He is not just bread, but the *living* bread. He is not just light, but the light of the *world*. Not just a shepherd, but the *good* shepherd. Not just a vine, but the *true* vine.

Now the word 'true' in Greek doesn't just mean true, like  $1+1=2$  is 'true'. It has a much more complex and nuanced meaning than that. It means true in the sense that it is essential to the fabric of life, it is true in its deepest being. It is authentic, genuine, sure, the real McCoy! Jesus is not just a vine, but the genuine and authentic vine, the real thing!

By implication, there must be other vines that are not true. Vines that are inauthentic, not genuine. Vines that are fake, lacking in integrity, imposters. The implication seems to be that

we, as branches, need to associate ourselves with the true vine, Jesus Christ, not false vines. It has to do with our identity, with who we are in the world, with who we are in Christ.

When we remain in the vine, in Jesus, we take our identity, our sense of self, from Jesus. Being in Jesus becomes the centre or the root of our identity. I see myself as a Christian first, and everything else second. My deepest sense of self is grounded, rooted in my relationship with Jesus, as his disciple, as a follower of the way, as a child of God. We find our identity not in our job, or our social standing, or our family relationships or our political party. These things are all fine, but they are secondary. Our position in Christ comes first.

So I, Adrian, am first a Christian and second a social worker. I'm first a Christian, and then a middle-aged white guy. I'm first a Christian, and then a feminist. First a Christian, and then a member of political party. First Christian, then Anglican, First Christian, then husband and father. My identity in Christ is first, it is the foundation for everything else. It is not that I have to choose between Christ and others. Rather, it is about priority or sequence. All my other identities and roles are seen through my primary identity as Christian. So, I am a social worker, but I'm first a Christian, so I practice social work as a Christian, informed by and shaped by my identity in Christ. I'm a Christian citizen, a Christian feminist, a Christian husband.

This Christ-centred identity is always first. Everything else follows. And when I hold fast to this identity, everything else will follow, naturally. Things work out. A vine does not work hard to produce fruit. We don't see vines straining to squeeze out grapes! Fruit just happens. So long as the vine has what it needs to flourish, it will naturally flourish. If we have a good rootstock that is resistant to disease, a vine from a good cultivar, the right soil, the right amount of water, air and sun, and an attentive gardener, fruit will happen. And of course, with Christ as the vine, and the Father as the gardener, and the Spirit of Life, we have all of this!

In this text, there is no exhortation to be fruitful. Rather, there is a repeated exhortation to *remain*. And when we remain in the vine, when we remain in Christ, fruit happens.

The NIV says we should remain in Christ. The King James says we should abide in Christ. The Jerusalem Bible says we should make our home in Christ. Jesus wants us to settle in him, and find a place of sanctuary and security there. Everything else will follow. If we just remain in him.

Listen to the promises.

If you remain in me, I will remain in you.

If you remain in me, you will bear much fruit.

If you remain in me,  
you can ask whatever you want and I will give it to you.

All of this, if we just remain in him.

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We are entering a new era in South Africa, after yesterday's inauguration of President Zuma. Some of you may have voted for him, others may have voted for someone else. It doesn't really matter now, because the majority of South African's wanted Jacob Zuma as president. So, how do we remain in Christ during this new era? How do we give expression to our identity in Christ now? How do we express our fruitfulness in this time?

Let me suggest one thing that I would urge all of us to do, faithfully over these next months and years. Let us pray for President Zuma, for his cabinet, parliament, for the premiers and MECs, for government officials and public servants. Let us pray for their salvation – that they

may realise the values of Christ – justice, integrity, love, humility and sacrifice. Let us pray that this new administration may succeed. It is in all of our interests.

Let us remain in Christ, let us hold fast to the identity that we have in him, let us stay in the vine.