

Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Most of us are familiar with the shape and size of Israel from the news. It's a relatively small country stretching only 263 miles from top to bottom and ranging from 71 miles at its widest point to a mere 9 miles at its narrowest point. It was pretty much like that in Jesus' day. Small as it is it offers a wide range of sceneries and ways of life – from the coast and lakes with their fishing, to mountains and hillsides with their agriculture, to fields and pastures with their livestock. And Jesus was able to draw from all this great diversity to give a rich explanation of God's kingdom and indeed a rich explanation of the Church which he was establishing; it's like a sower going out to sow; like wheat and weeds growing alongside each other; like a tree producing good fruit; like a plentiful harvest when the labourers are few; it's like a miraculous catch of fish. Last Sunday Jesus used analogies from sheep farming and spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd, so different from the hired man; and this week he uses an analogy from agriculture and vine dressing likening himself to the true vine of which we are the branches.

What is Jesus teaching us through this analogy of the vine and the branches? What is it saying about the kingdom of God and about the Church? We find the biggest clue in the opening words: *"I am the true vine"*. There is an implied contrast with an unnamed false vine. In the Old Testament the chosen people were described as a vine or a vineyard and God is described as the vinedresser. In Psalm 80 we read, *"You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took root and filled the land."* In Isaiah the prophet we find, *"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choicest vines."*¹ And again, *"A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! I, the Lord, am its keeper."*² But this vineyard failed the Lord, the vinedresser; as Isaiah the prophet records so eloquently when he writes, *"he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded sour grapes....he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed; for righteousness but behold an outcry."*³ The people of Israel, the chosen people have proven themselves a false vine but Jesus and his branches will be the true vine. Jesus is speaking of a new beginning.

Jesus draws on so many sources to help his followers to understand how they are to follow him – so let us ensure that the seed sown in us has fallen into good ground rather than stony ground or brambles; that we do not allow the weeds to strangle our wheat and - using the analogy from last Sunday's gospel - that we are sheep who know the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow him. And finally, taking our cue from today's gospel, that we are branches truly attached to the vine, and pruned by the word of God, in order to bear much fruit.

¹ Is 5:1-2

² Is 27:2-3 & 7

³ Is 5:2