**John 15:1-17**

**Intimacy with God**

As human beings, we crave intimacy: it’s part of our DNA, part of how we were created: to share in a relationship, or relationships, of deep love and mutual understanding is part of what it means to be human, part of what it means for us to understand who we are, who we were created to be.

In his book, ‘The Inner Circle’, Brad Meltzer said simply this: “There’s nothing more intimate in life than simply being understood. And understanding someone else”. Somehow, it we don’t have that intimacy in our lives, if we don’t have that mutual understanding, our lives are lacking and there is an emptiness inside. We all want to be understood. We all want to understand. We all want intimacy.

For many, intimacy is found to a large extent in human relationships. But even that is not infallible and human-to-human intimacy can still be lacking. As crucial as that form of intimacy is for us all, we long for an intimacy that is constant and deep and all-consuming. And it is no surprise, of course, that this level and depth of intimacy can only be found in our relationship with God.

And so, on its deepest level, a craving for intimacy is a craving for God; a craving to return to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve walked with God and he walked with them and they enjoyed the beauty of creation together in silent wonder. The return to Eden is a powerful driver in our lives because we long for the intimacy of that primeval relationship in all its purity and wonder.

And when we consider our own frailties and the mess we often make of our lives, we sometimes wonder if a return to Eden could ever be possible. After all, there is little or no purity that we can bring to a relationship with God and so, because of the stains on our soul, intimacy is lost: Paradise is Lost.

But thinking like that does not take into account the glory of the Gospel through which the return to Eden is made possible and intimacy with God is restored. Christ restores the intimacy of Eden between us and the Father, who is the Gardener.

And this ‘I Am’ saying of Jesus that we just heard in our Gospel reading is a beautiful idea for us to consider: where Jesus says “I am the vine and you are the branches”, because it brings us back to the promise of that intimacy of the Garden of Eden, which we can enjoy with our Father God.

Here we are presented with a seemingly gentle image; that of the vine growing in the vineyard, slowly developing and maturing as the years roll by, with a gardener coming round every year to do some pruning that will help the branches develop more fruit. But what at first sight seems like a gentle, agricultural metaphor actually houses for us the heart of the Gospel and everything that we most desperately long for: The return to Eden.

So let’s have a look at what Jesus is telling us through this ‘I am’ saying…

Just the very fact that Jesus uses the vine as a metaphor is itself a promise of hope and restoration. He was not unique in using this metaphor. It was a common idea in the middle-eastern world amongst spiritual teachers and we find examples from many non-Christian writings, from Palestinian Judaism, from philosophers of the time and, of course, from the Old Testament too. But the way Jesus uses it in this passage from John is unique. In the Old Testament – and in Jesus’ parables too – whenever the vine is used as a metaphor, it always points to the failure of Israel to produce the requisite fruit that would make them pleasing to God. It was a symbol, if you like, of the failure of Israel to be what they should be in the eyes of God.

But here is Jesus re-writing its usage by calling himself ‘the true vine’: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener”. Jesus is saying that he is the fulfilment of all Israel’s hopes and dreams for what they could become. Israel had failed to live out their destiny but Jesus has come and fulfilled that for them: he is the true vine and in him the hopes and dreams of the nation are fulfilled before God. The intimacy with God that had been lost to the nation and the restoration of which they had been striving for many centuries is now restored to them through the Messiah, Jesus Christ the Son of God.

And the same is true for each one of us, of course: weak and frail as we are, we too fail to live out our destiny. Time and again, we get it wrong with God, we get it wrong with ourselves and others and we fail to be the people God has called us to be. But Jesus is the true vine – he gets it right with God and if we are united to Christ, grafted into him, then his destiny becomes our destiny and we are made right with God and we can truly become the person that God has made us to be

and we can enjoy the relationship with God that we were first destined to have: not because I get it right or you get it right but because Jesus has got it right and we are grafted into him.

So our understanding of this passage begins with the realisation that we don’t need to strive to achieve intimacy with God; Jesus has gone before us and won that back on our behalf and invites us into union with him so that his intimacy with the Father becomes our intimacy with the Father.

But lest we have too rose-tinted view of that intimacy, Jesus tells us straight away that there is inevitably pain involved in that. Intimacy begins with pruning away all that is not good and is not helpful. In verse 2, Jesus says of his Father, “Every branch that does not bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful”.

I’m sure we have all had periods of pruning in our lives when we sense the hand of God on us in a way that is painful. And it hurts. But, as Jesus says here, it is done for a purpose: so that we can become even more fruitful and so even the pain is a sign of intimacy, a product of the intimacy of love that we share with God.

In his intimate love, God wants us to be fruitful and in order for that to happen, sometimes we need to be pruned. But even in our pain, the intimacy is not lost; far from it as Jesus says in verse 4, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you”. Even in the times of trial, in the difficult times, in the times when we are being pruned, the intimacy with God is never lost: he remains in us as we remain in him. And so, even when we don’t feel the presence of God with us because of the pain, we can stand firm in the faith knowing that the intimacy is not lost because it runs far deeper than mere emotion or feeling.

He remains in us – even if we don’t feel it…

And so as we remain in Jesus and he remains in us, what is this fruit that we will bear?

It’s strange how there have been so many different interpretations of this when Jesus quite clearly gives us the answer in the passage itself. Some people have argued that he is referring to the fruit of obedience. Others that the fruit will be new converts through missionary activity. Others think that he is referring to the fruit of love, and other people say he is referring to the Fruit of the Spirit. But Jesus tells us what the fruit is in verse 7: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you”.

The fruit of the vine to which Jesus refers is answered prayer - and again, this is born out of the intimacy of the relationship that we have with God. Because the truth is that God is so intimate with us that he hears us when we pray and he wants to meet all our needs.

Now, we trot that idea off our lips so easily without often thinking about the magnitude of what we are saying. But how incredible that the Father God hears us when we pray in Jesus’ name.

And the intensity of that intimate relationship is heightened in verse 9, where Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love”. The interesting thing about this verse is the three verbs Jesus uses: “loved me”, “loved you” and “remain”. In the Greek, these are all in a tense that indicates completeness; a finished act. So Jesus is saying that the Father’s love for him is complete, lacking nothing, and Jesus’ love for us is complete and lacks nothing. And, in response to that complete and utter love that Jesus has for us, we are to remain in him completely; giving ourselves completely over to him in love and intimacy.

And as we do that, so the love of God transforms our hearts and it transforms the way we relate to others and Jesus is able to say in verse 12: “My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you”. The intimacy that we share with God becomes the foundation of the relationship that we share with one another.

So, ultimately, the Christian faith is all about intimacy; with God and with one another. But I just want to say an extra word here to explore a little further about what that intimacy with God looks like and, more importantly, what it doesn’t look like. Because sometimes Christians fall into the trap of thinking that intimacy with God is akin to informality and even a casual approach to the relationship. But we need to guard against that and Jesus warns us against being too casual with God here.

Now, this is a slightly counter-intuitive point; but we need to grasp it all the same and let me put it as simply as I can. Jesus is not my friend. Jesus is not your friend. And Christians make an error when they talk about Jesus as if he was our friend because very often it leads to a casual approach to the faith that is unbecoming of our relationship with God. I once had a book called ‘Jesus is your best mate’. Now, that might be an extreme example of casualness off the end of the scale but too often we talk about Jesus as if he is our best mate! He’s not.

And there’s a real nuance in Scripture here, which is very important. In verse 15, Jesus says this: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” Now, here’s the thing. We are friends with God – but God is not our friend. Nowhere in Scripture is God described as a friend of a human being. In the Old Testament, Abraham is called a friend of God - but God is not called a friend of Abraham. Moses is called a friend of God - but God is not called a friend of Moses. In the New Testament, Lazarus is called a friend of Jesus - but Jesus is not called a friend of Lazarus. And here, we are called friends of God - but God is not called a friend of ours.

And that is really important, actually, because it makes clear that the relationship is not one of equals and whilst we may have intimacy with God, there remains a healthy distance of respect. I may say that I am a friend of the Bishop of Edmonton but I wouldn’t expect him to say that he is my friend, because we are not on an equal footing – he is my boss, my superior. You understand the nuance…

So we need to be sure that the intimacy we share with God does not lead us into the trap of thinking that Jesus is our friend, far less our best mate…He is God and he has declared us his friends, with all the intimacy that this entails. But that does not imply a relationship of equality or anything approaching it.

I am a friend of Jesus – but Jesus is not my friend.

You are a friend of God – but God is not your friend.

And Jesus makes that clear when he defines for us the basis of the friendship, which is the fact that God has chosen to reveal himself to us. Abraham was called a friend of God and Moses was called a friend of God specifically because God chose to reveal his mind to them. And in the same way, we learn from verse 12 that we are friends of God for exactly the same reason: “I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you”.

So this is an intimacy developed because God has graciously chosen to reveal himself to us and even then, it is not because we deserve it but because he graciously bestows it upon us. As Jesus reminds us in verse 16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you…”

The intimacy we share with God is absolutely not the same as informality or equality and we must always remain humbled by that truth.

So this is a truly beautiful ‘I Am’ saying of Jesus as he invites us into an intimate relationship with the Father. He wants to abide in us as we abide in him. To be sure, that can sometimes be painful as we are pruned and made fit for purpose, as it were, but ultimately, God wants to share himself with us and to call us his friends.

So wherever we are at this morning, whether we are in a good place or a hard place, we can be confident in the friendship of God; that he remains with us and hears our prayers and wants to bestow the honour of friendship upon us. That is the greatest privilege we could ever know and for the intimacy of this moment, the intimacy of this life, we will be eternally grateful.

When we learn to receive God’s intimate love and intimate friendship, when we learn to share intimate love with one another, then we truly will be restored to Eden…