

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 15: Some Notes

It is, fortunately, perfectly possible to read Chapter 15 and get a lot out of it, with no background knowledge. But you get more out of the reading if you know what John knew and what his listeners/readers knew. If you have seen the Hampton Court vine or something more local, you know a bit about vine spreading, vine pruning, and vine fruitfulness. From living and observing, you know something about love and friendship; and maybe from reading you know something about being a servant or being a slave.

Living in the world, you know something about the different ways in which that word “world” is used – nowadays usually neutral, but sometimes with the very opposite flavours of either having both feet on the ground rather than you head in the clouds, or of being a bit too ready to conform to current bad behaviour rather than of having standards of your own. You may have had your own experience of being unpopular because you refuse, on principle, to join in with what others are saying or doing (or NOT doing or saying). You are used to the idea of getting away with things when you don’t know any better, but being held to account once you know what is right and choose not to do it. You will have your own half-understanding of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and probably can’t really sympathise with the Church splitting in half over whether the Spirit comes from the Father alone or comes from the Father and the Son (as “our” Creed says).

The background bits are still important and helpful. The Vine is used in many places in the Old Testament to describe Israel/the Jewish people; but it is always used in the context of saying that what God planted hasn’t lived up to God’s intentions. So, in claiming to be the True Vine, Jesus is saying that Jewishness isn’t enough. Follow Him, be part of Him, and get it right. In a Christian context, maybe we need to hear Him saying that attending, and in that sense alone, being part of the Church, isn’t enough. We need to be active Christians, living Jesus-filled lives; not just being people giving Him nominal allegiance. Of course, it is great (and maybe easier, if we live on a “Jesus high” all the time; but most of us don’t. We have to serve faithfully without flames coming out our ears.

Prince Harry said something very useful about love, service, friendship, partnership, fruitfulness, in his Radio 4 slot. He said that we are all a bit too inclined to conclude that “We can’t do anything about it”, “Can’t change things”, “Can’t make a difference”. He recognised that he (and his father, Prince Charles) are better placed than most to make a difference; but made the entirely valid point that everyone can do something... and of course if you can recruit others or join with others, you can do more. Shirley Neighbourhood Care, Shrublands Food Bank, the Night Shelters, peer-mentoring for learning to read in prison, etc, etc, are all ordinary person initiatives. The Invicta Games was a Royal initiative, but depends on individual disabled ex-service men and women. William Barclay talks about *“profession without practice, words without deeds”*.

Why should Christians be “hated”, rather than just despised, ignored, etc? When John wrote, from a Roman perspective, people in the Empire could worship any god they fancied, provided that once a year they worshipped the Emperor as a god. For many, that wasn’t much to ask: one more god was no great deal.. and a lot of the gods were no great shakes in terms of good behaviour! Christians (and a lot of Jews) just wouldn’t comply, and were therefore traitors to an Empire which meant law and order and perhaps prosperity for many. Then, thanks to malicious rumours, Christians were popularly supposed to be cannibals: “Eat my body”; and since they wouldn’t be eating other Christians.....

The huge challenge for Christians, then and now, is Jesus’ commandment that, just as people could look at Him and see how God spoke, acted, and loved in action, so they should be able to look at and listen to His followers and see God in action. Blimey! Perhaps this challenge is the best answer to those who think that Jesus in John’s Gospel is telling us to have nothing to do with the “world”. It is worthwhile thinking about our personal mix of “not getting involved” and “witnessing”. You can fairly easily recognise a Jehovah’s Witness, not just by their “J W Org” badge, but by what they won’t do (like Christmas) and do do (like witnessing). Us? Where does the courage to be different slide into being awkward for the sake of it, or fade into conforming at any cost? Does the courage to be different sometimes mean being different from other members of the congregation? Is being myself the same as being faithful to Christ?