

Close to Margaret Thatcher's former residence at 19 Flood Street is a wonderful Clematis- more tree than plant. Like all such climbers, and perhaps Prime Ministers, Clematis blossom is intense and spectacular- but short-lived. While it lasts the whole street is enhanced by not only the colour of the flowers, but the promise of abundance which they betoken. Something new is breaking through, bringing attraction, delight, even if this year we seem to have reversed from spring to winter .

Now I raise this, not because I am a secret arboriculturalist, or historian of prime ministers, but rather because Clematis features strongly in today's Gospel. ' I didn't hear that- I can see you thinking'. That's

because the word Clematis- the name of the plant in English is the very word used in the Gospel for branches- and very particularly the branches of the vine.

‘I am the Vine, you are the branches’ proclaims Jesus. I am the vine you are the Clematis.

The first danger- of course, is that as I’ve already mentioned, we really only notice a clematis, while it is in flower, what for a few weeks in the year. All the rest of the time it’s a rather messy looking creeper. If I am the Vine and you are the branches – this cannot surely be the way in which we are to live, occasional blossoming into stardom and 90% boring. No, John’s Gospel, asserts – as does both the Acts of the Apostles reading and the epistle, that we are engaged in participation in Christ 24/7.

And here's another issue.

'I am the vine you are the branches' gives a sense of two separate elements. But of course, just like the root, the stem, the petals, the fruit, so too the branches are an integral part of the vine. Branches have no life of their own.

Branches that are lopped off wither and die faster than the closure of NatWest branches. 'I am the Vine and you are the branches' underlines not only our 24/7 commitment, but also our integrity in the total vine. Rather like St Teresa in her assertion:

Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands, no feet, no lips but yours.. We are at one with this Jesus the vine, as surely fed by his body and blood in this eucharist as the

branches of the vine are fed by the nutrients of the whole vine.

And again, branches, we, the Clematis, are not the end of the affair- this underscores that integrity, yes, but we are conduits, supports, necessary pathways to fruit, fruit that will last.

No fruit can grow unless the whole vine, including the branches support and nourish it.

We are not the be all and end all, but the purpose of the whole vine is to produce good grapes- the fruit which flows through us fed by Christ and energised by the Spirit, fruit which nourishes.

These texts which we hear today at heart echo what we proclaim, that God is love. A love which – as Easter people, bids us stand in awe of a love which cannot be nailed down nor

destroyed. They encourage us to recognise and understand that where we see love, we see the presence of God- as the choir often sings on Maundy Thursday night- the beginning of the intense Easter Days, Ubi Caritas et amor, Deus ibi est. Where love and charity dwell, there is God. It is out of that love that Jesus enters into the agony of his betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death and, of course, Resurrection. Love, not only as an abstract idea, a good thing, but love which we discover as action, love resetting the compass for our living.

And therefore it is not surprising that we see such love in action in the reading from Acts. How could anyone hear this reading today without reference to the dire situation in Gaza. Philip is walking the ancient road south to Gaza and on

the Egypt when he comes across the struggling court official returning to Ethiopia, confused, a very long way from home. He stops and accompanies him until the official comes to understanding, is baptised, is rooted in, included, and then Philip's work is done. Love in action on the Gaza Road today needs to look different, but to be essentially the same. To commit to solidarity, to stand alongside the struggling and oppressed, to bring good news to the poor, to feed the hungry, to release the captive, ... in other words to restore human dignity, which is none other than divine dignity, God's dignity and worth, in every human life. Of course, that cannot be done without tackling the injustices which prohibit the rooting of

meaningful peace. But every action of love counts.

And The people whom John is addressing in the epistle are those who, while acknowledging God's love- are not yet putting it into practice.

They are behaving selfishly, treating others with discrimination or suspicion. They haven't yet seen the need to connect the awe of God's love with the action which flows from such awe.

These two cannot be separated, just as the branches cannot be separated from the vine if they are to bear fruit. Is John speaking also to us?

IN one of his Christmas sermons, the Poet and priest and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, John Donne, describes God's love as 'like a circle - endless'. It is a good comparison for the vine in

its totality, from root to fruit, from growing to fulness before returning to the very earth to be the food for the next flowering- we are part of the process. Not short-lived, not blossoming and fading, but to be the very clematis, the branches along which and out of which, fruit can be delivered- in Flood Street and in Gaza, everywhere, every day.

‘I am the vine you are the branches’

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