

ViralStJames Bible Study #16: Finding Joy

The Background – Finding Joy

John 15 1-17

With a Bristolian family background, as well as following the one football team in Bristol, I take a keen interest in the Bristol rugby team, or Bristol Bears as they are now known. This weekend, they were in their first European Final. Their coach, Pat Lam, a New Zealander with Samoan descent sent the team out with these words: *'Let's go and celebrate who we are and what that means. The way we play the game, the way our culture is, our love for each other. Let's focus on the joy'*.

At times like this, when the news seems particularly gloomy, it may be hard to focus on the joy, but as Keith said at our annual church meeting, we will soon be celebrating the joy and hope that Christmas brings. Perhaps we need to remember that Paul's repeated references to celebrating joy in his letters were sent to churches that were often experiencing persecution and so knew that life is not a smooth passage as Christians – but that there was still much to be thankful for.

So where is joy to be found? In this passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples just before his impending arrest and trial and gives us a clear steer.

The Passage

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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The Questions

- 1) Read John 15:1-17. Jesus describes himself as 'the true vine' and his Father as 'the gardener'. Why do you think he uses this analogy/comparison? (Jeremiah 2:21 and Isaiah 5:1-2 may provide clues)

The Disciples were Israelites, who saw themselves as a vine brought by God out of Egypt and planted in the promised land of milk and honey. However, as the OT passages remind us, the Israelites failed to live out their destiny to be a light to the people around them, rebelling against God. Jesus identifies himself as the true Israelite, rooted and established in God and obedient to his father's commands.

- 2) In verses 2-6, and staying with his vine comparison, what two things does Jesus call his disciples to do? And what promise does he give?

- Remain in him
- Bear fruit
- Promise - Remain in him and he will remain in us

- 3) How can we 'remain in Jesus'? (v 10 gives a clue) What do you think this means in practice? How does Jesus remain in us? Do you see a role for the Holy Spirit in this?

- 'v10 talks about 'obeying my Father's commands – of which we know the greatest is to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself – so there is a practical element involved – remaining requires action – it is active not just passive;
- However, there is also a need to remain 'grafted in' to the vine – connected to the life-giving work of the Spirit nourishing us – through prayer, reflection and reading/study of the Bible

- 4) Note that in verse 8, Jesus is addressing the disciples (plural) – we produce fruit through working together. Reflecting back on the last few months, and perhaps after reading the Annual Report, can you identify any fruit that we have produced?

- 5) Given the current circumstances of the pandemic, how can we best continue to work together to be fruitful?

- 6) Jesus talks about fruitful branches being 'pruned' or 'cleansed' (v2). What do you think this means?

Our strength, our refreshing, comes from remaining grafted into Jesus – we can't go it alone independently but need to remain dependent.

As we do so, we may find the Holy Spirit flowing from the vine, prodding us in areas where we need to repent and change our priorities or actions – things we should refrain from, or actions we should take. As noted in Q3, We can only remain alert to

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this through practices such as praying, reading the Bible, staying 'plugged in' to our fellow disciples.

7) Where does Jesus tell his disciples that joy will be found?

As we obey the commands of Jesus, to love one another, we discover more of what it means to be truly human, living as we were created to, serving one another and turning away from trying to make it on our own. We discover what it means that giving is better than receiving (though at some stages of our lives we will also need to receive the gifts of others when we need support)

8) Pat Lam, when speaking at a school in Ireland when he was training an Irish side, reminded the pupils, many of whom were suffering from low esteem, that each of them knew at least one person who believed in them, and asked them how did that make them feel? Jesus believes in his disciples and calls them 'my friends' (v15). How does it make you feel knowing that Jesus calls us not servants, but friends and that he believes in us? Does that give us something to celebrate and be joyful about?

9) There are some extraordinary promises about prayer in v7 and v16. Sometimes it can feel that our prayers are not, as seemingly promised here, answered in the way we would like. How do we deal with this?

- *We have to accept that we cannot know everything, that there are mysteries that we will not understand this side of our death and resurrection – as Paul, who remained with 'the thorn in his side' says, we currently see through a glass darkly, then we will see face to face;*
- *We may need to ask ourselves whether what we are praying for is the fruit we are called to bear (v16)*
- *Either way, we should not give up praying.*

10) We may once again be asked to 'Love Devizes' as a covid 19 response. Jesus had to demonstrate his love for us by defeating the powers of evil on the cross to set us free to be truly human. We too may be asked to make sacrifices, but loving others can, as Jesus says, be a joyful experience, not an onerous task. Think about what ways you can demonstrate love to those around you in whatever role you are in. We can all make a difference – sometimes by as small a matter as an encouraging word.

Closing thought:

Finally, take a few minutes to reflect on Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5 16-18 and to name and give thanks to God for the blessings he has given us.

'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus'

PS – for those of you wondering, the Bristol Bears won the match and were very joyful!

Pat Lam ascribes his motivation to Romans 12 v2