



Biblical Meditation

THE VINE

Clifford Hill

January 2013

Why did Jesus compare himself to a vine? *"I am the true vine,"* he said *"and my Father is the Gardener."* (John 15.1) But why a vine? Why not a majestic oak tree, or an olive tree? An olive tree would surely have been a favourite among all the trees in Israel. Jesus regularly went to the Garden of Gethsemane when he was in Jerusalem. There were many olive trees there and Jesus would have sat under their shade in an olive grove talking to his disciples about the Kingdom of God. So why did he compare himself to a vine and not an olive tree?

The vine has been a symbol of the land of Israel for thousands of years. When Moses sent some men to explore the land of Canaan he chose representatives of each of the tribes of Israel and charged them with the task of going right through the land from the desert in the South to the hill country in the North and bringing back a report of the land; whether or not it was fertile or poor, and where there were trees and what kind of fruit they bore. Numbers 13.27 records *"They gave Moses this account: 'We went into the land to which you sent us and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit.'" The picture of the men bringing back bunches of grapes to present to Moses is the symbol used today by the Israeli Tourist Board.*

The vine was used by the Prophet Isaiah to symbolise the nation of Israel. He sang a song about a vineyard which the Gardener had planted with the choicest vines and he expected to get a crop of good grapes. He did everything possible to produce good grapes but it only yielded bad fruit. The song climaxed with the words, *"The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."* (Isaiah 5.1-7) This led to warnings that God would break down the wall of protection around the nation and bring judgement upon them.

Psalms 80 picks up this theme and laments that the wall of protection around the vineyard has been broken down by God *"so that all who pass by pick its grapes"*. The Psalmist says *"Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish"*. He calls upon God to raise up *"the son of man"* to redeem the nation. And in Isaiah 11 there is the Messianic prophecy *"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; and from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord*

will rest upon him - the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord".

So the vine was not only a symbol of the land of Israel, the good land flowing with milk and honey that God had provided for his Covenant people, it also had Messianic significance. No doubt Jesus was well aware of this as he would not only have known the history of Israel but would also have been familiar with the Ministry of Isaiah and the message of the Psalmist. But there is another, and far more significant, reason why Jesus chose the vine to represent himself and his Ministry.

It is this: the vine is the most useless wood of all the trees in the forest. The whole texture of its branches makes it impossible to use to make any useful article. Ezekiel says that it is so useless you can't even make a tent peg from its wood; it is only fit for burning (Ezekiel 15.3). In fact the whole of this chapter is devoted to comparing the uselessness of the vine to the uselessness of Jerusalem in serving the purposes of God. There is only one thing that the vine can do and that is bear fruit! It has no other purpose than to bear fruit for the Gardener.

This is what lies behind the teaching of Jesus in John 15. His statement, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the Gardener"* is of enormous significance. He then says to his disciples, *"I am the vine; you are the branches."* He has already said that the Gardener takes responsibility for ensuring that the branches bear good fruit. The branches do not have to strive to bear fruit unaided. The Gardener watches over the vine and branches that bear no fruit are cut out and burned because they serve no other purpose. But branches that do bear fruit, the Gardener prunes in order to enable them to produce even more fruit - good fruit - that pleases the Gardener.

The disciples had been chosen by Jesus: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last."* (John 15.16) Once they had responded to the call of Jesus to discipleship their paramount task was to produce fruit for the kingdom: this was the only true purpose of their lives. So Jesus reminds them that they cannot do this on their own, or in their own strength. He says, *"apart from me you can do nothing"*, just as a branch of the vine cannot bear fruit if it is cut off from the vine. Once it becomes separated from the vine it is useless and is only fit for burning in the fire.

But what is the true fruit of the vine: the fruit that will last? No, it is not grapes - not even good grapes. Grapes are just seeds. They are fruit, but not fruit that will last. The grapes will only last a short time before they become corrupt and are only fit for the compost heap. Their true purpose, as with all seeds, is to reproduce. The true fruit of the vine is another vine; just as the fruit of an apple tree is not an apple, but another apple tree. So the fruit of the disciple is another disciple. This is the fruit of the Kingdom - the fruit that will last.

This paper comes to you as part of the Issachar Ministries Intercessory news e-mailing January 2013

Reproduction is permitted but the office would like to know 'how many and to whom' © Dr Clifford Hill

C & M Ministries Trust (known as Issachar Ministries UK) Registered charity no 1029797

Moggerhanger Park, Park Road, Moggerhanger, Bedford, MK44 3RW Telephone: 01767 641006 ext 221 Fax: 01767 641515

Website: www.issacharministries.co.uk E-mail: info@issacharministries.co.uk