**Easter 5 Year B 2018**

I was out walking on Monday afternoon and I passed through Ladywell Fields Park. I was up there by the river behind the hospital and I was walking past a tree but I was actually walking on the grass not on the other side of the tree where the tarmac path was. It’s just nicer to walk on grass when you can. Well literally as I passed under the tree I heard a very loud crack and a huge branch fell on to the path – where I should really have been walking.

So I looked up into the tree and, actually, a little beyond the tree and perhaps in a little bit of shock shouted “Missed! Missed me!” Well with the help of another walker I was able to lift the branch off the path and into the rough ground by the river. It really was a sizeable branch, not just a twig! But it was a dead weight. And it struck me then – no, not another branch – but it struck me that this deadweight was actually the dead wood of a dead branch. Later that evening I was looking ahead towards today and saw that today’s gospel, while not actually about trees and branches, was about the vine and its branches and my near-miss experience gave me a little insight into its meaning.

Jesus offers us this image of himself as the vine and of us as his branches. We are part of him and play a part in his life. So it is his life, the life of His Spirit that passes through us and makes us alive. Because unlike the dead branch that nearly did me some damage we are living branches. We draw life and nourishment from our roots and from the daylight around us through the leaf system but we pass that on ultimately to our fruit. But we are not the fruit, only the branches. If as branches we fail to pass on nourishment then we become dead wood and dead branches and ultimately we drop off. We do so under our own weight or we are pruned away but either way we have no further role to play in the life of the vine. In fact, if we stay attached we ultimately damage the vine.

One thing about vines is that they grow and spread everywhere in every direction. They weave and bind and cover everything, but that is not the point of a vine. The purpose of a vine is to produce fruit. The fruit of the vine is of course the sweet juicy grape. The fruit of the vine that Jesus describes himself to be, is something else. It doesn’t specifically say so in this gospel but I think that the fruit of his vine is the **community** of life and love that his life and love nourishes and creates. That community can be recognised at every level or scale. It can be seen in the friendships that ripen and then grace the world. It can be seen in marriage. It can be seen in family life. It can be seen in a wider community or society that it helps to form and create. So if society’s values are not ripe and sweet and are instead rotten and bitter then the branches are not doing their job properly. The branches are in place to produce fruit – to create the kingdom of God in our home, in our street, in our parish community, in our town, in our country and in our world. And so if we look out despondently at what is around us and turn our backs on it, then we are failing the vine. The vine does wish to grow and spread everywhere and shed its fruit of life and love in every part of the world and we as branches must comply. The vine that produces no fruit will ultimately wither and die.

So as branches we must be alive to the nourishment that is being offered to us through the vine, in Jesus and also be alive to the mission of passing on that nourishment into the relationships that build up and establish the friendships, the marriages, the family life, the church itself, the wider society and indeed the world wide-family of mankind – the kingdom of God.

I am the vine, you are the branches.