

The Somerset Vine

An imaginative parable shared with the Archdeaconry Training events by the Revd Graham Owen, Rector of Wiveliscombe

Suppose there was a great vine in Somerset. A beautiful vine. An ancient vine of old stocks and roots and branches. But also of new shoots and sinews. Always stretching, reaching, spreading, working away; always with a purpose: to get the vine rooted into all the uncovered territory that it can find. It is a gorgeous vine of glorious green leaves that love to turn ruby red with the coming of the colder wind and the autumn sunshine. A luscious vine bearing a heavy load of fruit: healing, joy, love or peace. And it is all made possible because through it flows something precious, so precious that its worth cannot be told in money: the gift of life. This vine is alive.

But not everywhere. Sadly, I want to take you to one particular branch where the flow of life is being stopped up. This is a branch that is fretting: it is afraid that there might be more flowing out of it than is flowing in. This is a branch that has lost its balance, lost its faith, become so worried about everything to do with the vine that it is paralysed, afraid that the worst could happen. The gardener might come with those sharp secateurs of his, and with "a hey and a no and a to the bonfire we go", make an end of the branch altogether - worst nightmare!

There is only one thing for it. Call a meeting. Here they come now, all the branch members; a bright green leaf, a few new stalks, a representative of the crusty old bark, a few variously shaped nobbles and a mixed bunch of fruit. But it is a pretty dismal council.

Listen to them beefing on: the variously shaped nobbles say that they've always been pulling more than their fare share of the weight and now its time

for the green leaves to stop languidly lounging around and work a bit harder with all that sunlight and stop keeping it to themselves. And the mixed fruit needn't look so smug since they've taken up far more of the sap than is really their share, and they could do with passing some on to other parts of the branch, and isn't our branch being asked to do more than all the other branches, shouldn't we complain to the thicker trunk about that, and go on strike and stop sending so much out.

"No wonder we're in such a state". And then the fruit rep chimes in: he can't see no reason for passing no more on since it will only be wasted further up the vine, and what's the point of contributing to something when you can't see the result anyway. And another thing, isn't it true that the rest of the vine is a wonderfully rich and ebullient vine and in no need whatever of our hard earned sap which it won't really miss if we don't send it. No, our resources would be much better used here in our branch so let's dam it up now!

The mixed fruits all agree with the sense spoken by its rep and by the nobbles some of whom had commercial experience in a former life, and they move a motion to that effect saying they've jolly well earned the right to hang on to what they've got because once they've given it away they won't get any more. Some of the green leaves are so offended at being told they aren't doing enough that they instantly turn red and fall off in a huff.

All the while, the crusty old bit of bark holds his peace. He is the only one to notice that while all this arguing is going on, the branch is shrinking, those leaves that haven't fallen off are looking limp, the fruits are smaller, harder, becoming bitter, not what they are supposed to be, and what is that, starting to appear all over the branch? Mold! The life is ceasing to flow through the branch: rights and wrongs, jealousies and priorities, narrow horizons and small faith; the branch is dying and hastening the very end it dreads.

The bark barks: "Oi!" Finally some quiet! And he points out one or two little somethings that seem to have been forgotten: like had they ever seen the sun shining on the vine on a beautiful autumn day, had they ever breathed in the

joy of it all? Yes of course, they sing it every Sunday, "you are the vine we are the branches.....". Now - what had they really done to make themselves part of such a beautiful vine? Answer: nothing. Nobody could deny it, all that had been done for them. Too right, and it had cost more than a bit of sap.

Right, now whose vine is it anyway and what actually had they done towards filling the vine with the life that enables it to reach across the land? Well, nothing actually, nobody could deny it, all that too was being done for them. Too right and so maybe it might be a good thing to be a bit grateful that we are a part of this amazing thing. And then, rather than stock up all our sap for ourselves, why don't we open up the flow, let it flow everywhere the gardener wants it to go. Why if that happens, there is no way that we can be called useless, in fact there will be new resources coming in all the time to renew us and even the variously shaped nobbles might even have to agree that the more sap we are giving away the more sap we will get.....

Let's sneak out of the council meeting at that point. But I wonder what they decided. Did the variously shaped nobbles, leaves and mixed fruits win the day? Did they keep their resources for themselves and cause their branch to die, to be cut off and burned on the rubbish heap? Or did the crusty old bark prevail? Did the members of the branch understand that they were called to be beautiful living parts of a beautiful and living vine, and in their joy, in their gratitude to let it flow?

I wonder what they decided. I wonder what you will decide.