

Last Sunday we heard Jesus telling his followers, 'I am the good shepherd'. Today we hear him use another powerful metaphor, 'I am the true vine'. Once more Jesus uses an image familiar through the Old Testament – the vine – and again he contrasts good and bad, true and false.

The background to today's image of the vine is found in Isaiah 5 and again in Ezekiel. God owns a vineyard and plants a vine, but the vine doesn't bear fruit. The prophets are pointing out to the people of Israel that they are not bearing fruit in their relationship with God.

In contrast, Jesus takes on the role of the true vine, the true representative of God's people, who bears fruit through the new people of God being formed in him.

What are the qualities of this true vine?

First it is permanent. Jesus abides, he remains, stays, lives with us. Different translations offer different ways of trying to convey this permanence. Jesus is no fairweather friend, like the hired hand in last week's reading, who runs away when the going gets tough. He's with us for the duration.

Secondly it is interdependent. We are the branches; we must abide in Jesus just as he abides in us. It's no good us saying – or in the words of that old hymn, singing – 'Abide with me', if we are not prepared to enter into a mutual relationship of dependence with Jesus, and to abide with him.

Thirdly it needs pruning. I'm not much of a gardener but I know that my roses and shrubs will only flourish if I carefully prune them back. We need to get rid of the dead wood, to cleanse and renew our lives.

Fourthly the true vine empowers us. Just as the vine feeds its branches so that they bear fruit, so Jesus gives us power, strength and energy to bear fruit for his kingdom. And what fruit! Vines produce grapes and grapes produce wine; and so there is a long association with joy, gladness and conviviality. But this is no temporary joy, and there is no hangover! The fruit of the true vine leads to a complete and permanent joy, the joy of knowing that we are loved and cherished by our heavenly Father and guided by his Holy Spirit.

Of course, the vine also calls to mind Jesus' sacrifice, his blood poured out for us and commemorated in bread and wine. And so today we will share communion, and in so doing we will join ourselves once more to the true vine, so that we may bear much fruit in his service.