

## The Inner Dynamics of Servant Faith: From Root to Fruit and Vine to Wine

(Acts 8: 26-40; I John 4: 7-21; Psalm 80; John 15: 1-8)

It was eleven years ago that I made my first pilgrimage to the Abbey on the isle of Iona on the west coast of Scotland. The course of study for the week was Celtic theology and history, for which the Abbey itself is a living example. The week was during the Easter season and our scriptural focus for the week's worship was, naturally, the Easter stories from the gospels. Since that time, all of the Easter stories have taken on, for me, a new clarity and power. I'd like to show you how that happened, and I think I can do it by taking our Gospel lesson this morning in one hand, like a strand of wool, and then weaving into that background a different strand of "pilgrimage perspectives" from Iona Abbey.

"I am the Vine," says Jesus, "and you are the branches." This relationship between us, he explains, is direct, intimate, it's *organic*. The life that begins and thrives in him is *ours* through faith, and we proceed outward, in lush green growth, from his beginnings. The vine, of course, includes the *root*, because without a deep and healthy root there can be no vine. Without a clear sense of *rootedness*, without a fully conscious *connection* to our root in Christ, there is no distinctly *Christian* faith.

Well, I can honestly say that I have never been consciously aware of the rootedness of faith to the extent that I experienced it and breathed it at Iona. You see, there's a problem that we colonials have, in that our history doesn't go nearly as deep as that of people who live in older places. And there's a peculiar problem that infects the North American mind: it has to do with our drive to see ourselves as the author of ourselves, as the product of our own efforts, as the realization of our own dreams. On Iona, in the Abbey buildings and grounds, this faith goes back 1500 years, unbroken and virtually unchanged. And you can feel the roots through the chapel floor, through the ground around the high stone crosses. It has long been said that Iona is a "thin place", meaning that the customary sense of distance between us and God doesn't apply there. The eternal realities and the movements of the Holy Spirit are much closer, and you can feel the connection through the floor.

"I am the Vine, you are the branches, and your *purpose*," says Jesus (my paraphrase), "is to produce fruit to *share*, to produce that most amazing *wine* which to taste but once is to be changed forever." What faith produces, from its roots right out to its fruit, is to be served to the world. Ours is a *servant* faith. Which is to say, it's not just for our personal benefit or private enjoyment. Our faith requires active service on behalf of others, to fill human needs and to strengthen our sense of community.

Prior to my week at Iona, I had no experience whatever of monastic life. Sure, I read about it, I studied Christian history, I knew *something* about it, and yet really *nothing* at all. Monastic life is built on service of others, from beginning to end. Before, during and after every mealtime, for an hour or so each mid-morning, in worship and especially at Communion, each member of the community serves each other, works for each other, contributes labour for the benefit of the community, and it's in those

actions of service that the greatest sense of good fellowship and joyful participation are experienced. That's the way it was when St. Columba started the Abbey in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and that's the way it continues today.

There's a somewhat strange practice that's followed each day at Iona after Morning Worship. After the Benediction, while it may be customary in other locations for worshippers to sit, reflect and linger awhile, at Iona you stay on your feet and you move immediately out to do your assigned chores for the day. There's no separation between faith in worship and faith at work. It's a *servant* faith and there's no escaping it or even just putting it off!

"I am the vine, you are the branches, and any branch that does not produce fruit to share with the community," says Jesus, "is pruned back and cleaned out." It always amazes me in the gospels, not merely the *number* of stories Jesus told in which the theme is agricultural and the setting is the field, pasture or vineyard, but rather it's the depth of *knowledge* contained and revealed *in* those stories that amazes me. Well, I have a theory about this, and I'll share it with you.

We know that Jesus and his disciples travelled about the countryside, freely and continually, for at least a couple of years, maybe about five years. Well, in the ancient Middle East, there were really only *two* groups of people that were always on the move around the countryside. The one group was comprised of itinerant workers—people who travelled around especially at Spring planting and Fall harvest, when the demand for labour was highest, and they would go from farm to farm and work for cash, and then move along and work some more. The only *other* group that moved about continuously were the robbers, especially the professional ones who frequented the major trade routes, and who simply took whatever cash or goods they needed, to survive and to keep on the move.

Nothing in the biblical record suggests that Jesus and his friends were robbers, although curiously, Jesus was executed *between* two robbers. But many of his agricultural stories do suggest some hands-on experience and first-hand knowledge of his subject. When Jesus talks, for example, about the various things that can happen to the seed when you're planting, his observations are more detailed than a fellow could make from the shade of a tree at the edge of the field. Or when Jesus talks about sheep, how they really can recognize one human voice from a crowd of hundreds, and how they will follow one they trust *anywhere*, I don't think you really understand or appreciate those things merely by watching. When Jesus spoke about pruning vines, once again there's a degree of insight in his comments that goes far beyond that of the mere observer. I'm convinced that Jesus and his disciples *often* worked during their travels, to pay their own way, and I am especially convinced that the hands of Jesus, in addition to being scarred by nails, were calloused by carpenter's tools, fishing nets and the pruning knife.

Here's a little detail from his lesson about the vine. When Jesus first speaks of the pruning, we all understand the mechanics of cutting out the dead wood. But did you notice that twice in his statements about pruning Jesus spoke of "trimming *clean*" the branch and the vine "*being clean*" when

the pruning is finished. Here's something the casual observer is not likely going to know about the pruning process. The primary reason *why* you cut back the sucker growth is not just because it diverts growth away from the fruit, but because *where* the sucker growth forms, which is right around the primary branches where they come out from the pruned vine, the sucker shoot will form a little cage around it, in which leaves, dirt and other stuff can be trapped, and when that stuff begins to break down and form compost, a deadly rot will be introduced into the whole vine, right there. The vine and the fruit-bearing branches need to be cleaned and opened up to the circulation of air, because their very life depends on it. It's the same reason why the dead wood has to be trimmed away—not just because it's unsightly, but because the rot and insect life that's in the dead wood will quickly travel into the live wood unless it is removed. In a sense, the “cleaning” of the vine is the all-important *first step* in managing the vineyard. Again, I don't think the casual observer is going to understand that; it's really one of those things you only learn by doing, and understand only through experience.

In terms of pruning back to the basics of lively Christian faith, there's a curious thing that happens at Iona, most particularly at worship. Though the people who gather there come from all over the world (4 continents were represented in our group) and from every Christian tradition and denomination (a third of our group was Roman Catholic), there's a simple *commonality* in the liturgy, in the studies, in the daily work and fellowship that simply does away with all our denominational peculiarities or historical barriers. My sense was that Iona simply works on a different *definition* of “Church” than we do, and that Celtic Christianity can emphasize and embrace a *unity* in faith that makes it silly to speak of *differences* like Protestant or Catholic, Orthodox or Evangelical.

Now, there's another, deeper level in our gospel text that needs to be opened up to the light and then interwoven with another “Iona Moment”. When Jesus compared *himself* to the *vine*—the vine that gets pruned back to the point where it actually looks *dead*—he was indeed speaking of his own impending death. He made it extremely clear that God, as the Gardener, was directing the process, and that the purpose of the whole exercise was to allow new life to spring up, to allow new branches to bear new and more abundant fruit. His image of death was entirely surrounded by and taken over by the promise of new life. The shadow of his Cross was going to be overpowered by the most amazing and enduring light the world has ever seen.

On my first afternoon at the Abbey, there was about an hour of free time in the late afternoon. It was a beautiful afternoon *to look at*, in the sense that though delightfully sunny, there was a strong cold wind blowing relentlessly (which tends to be a regular feature of the island). I found a sheltered corner at the west side of the Abbey where I could sit in the sunshine and out of the wind, with my back to the stones which the sun had warmed. Right in front of me was one of the high stone crosses of Celtic design. As the sun gradually moved westward and lower in the sky, it reached the point where it was shining behind and through the huge cross. Where the sun outlined the cross, the edges of stone fully appeared to be dancing with red and yellow flames. And where the sun shone through the central circle

of the cross, its rays fell directly on my head, my heart and both shoulders. My sense of the power behind that cross and the light of its truth was utterly overwhelming. And being touched by the light that came *through* that cross, well, I could only compare that to ordination, except that this moment was far more powerful and more deeply penetrating.

Remembering—and being reminded when we forget—that our faith as Christians is rooted in Christ, and that our faith is for service of *his kingdom*, is a timely and pointed example of our need to be pruned back to basics in Christian faith. All those *other* ideas, about our own importance or about the supposed value of churchly traditions that we have created, those ideas need to be pruned regularly, because they interfere with new growth in Christ for others. But though we are neither the life in the vine nor the fruit of its energy, we do have a unique and exciting role to play in *connecting* the two, don't we? Linking the root to the fruit and the vine to the wine, is a task that's loaded with honour and trust, and it's an experience quite heady and stimulating—in the good way. Simply carrying in us the life of Christ has its own magnificent reward. But carrying that life to others, in helpful serving ways, to others who haven't known it before and who need it even more than we do, what reward could surpass that feeling? There's a joy that *is* indeed eternal!

Rev. Steven K. Smith  
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