

Jesus Christ always describes the relationship between himself and his disciples as one of closeness: he speaks of the shepherd and his sheep, or of food and drink for those who are hungry and thirsty – or even, in one place, of a mother hen and her chicks.

In the gospel today he goes a step further and speaks of this relationship not in terms of twoness, but of unity, as a vine and the branches that grow on it; this is more than a close relationship – it is a *connectedness of being*. The branches are part of the vine, they receive all their nourishment and life from it, and separated from the vine they wither and die. The nearest kind of connectedness we have to this is the child in its mother's womb. Both child and mother share the same lifeblood: vine and branches, mother and child. It is a connectedness of being and of life.

This is at the very heart and root of faith: not articles of dogma or statements of belief, not lists of rules and regulations – these things are important enough and without them we would have theological and moral anarchy. However, our relationship with God is not a matter of doing but *being*. It isn't a matter of giving to charity or giving things up for Lent or coming to Mass or saying our prayers – although they are equally important – it's a matter of realizing that we grow out

of God like branches growing out of a vine. Giving to charity, Lenten self-discipline, Mass and prayers – these things *express* our connectedness with God in Christ; they don't make it happen, they are ways of living it. They are effects, not causes. Being always comes first... doing comes second and should manifest being. The rich metaphor of the vine and the branches is about who we *are* – and so it should shape and inform all that we *do*; if we are the branches that grow from the vine of the Lord, our lives must surely show it. This connectedness of being gives meaning to our lives and, in it, we can discover meaning in the most troubled circumstances of our lives; and when we find meaning, we also discover within ourselves fundamental meaning and purpose, we find strength to live every moment for what it is.

The only unendurable suffering is suffering which seems to have no meaning. Meaninglessness is the malaise of our time, but because the empty space at the centre of our being is too terrible to face, people desperately search for something to distract themselves from it: addiction, promiscuity, wealth, power – anything. But all these things can give only temporary relief. I believe that knowing Christ as the vine and ourselves as the branches, carries a deep meaning that can never be lost. In time, everything will be taken away from us – possessions,

homes, family, friends and, in the end, our physical life, our body – but we can never be lost. The individual being that each one of us is, cannot be lost because the branches share the life of the vine and the vine is eternal, indestructible, rooted in the heart of God himself.

Sometimes we might wonder what to make of Jesus' words: "Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away" and: "Anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that has been thrown away – he withers; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire, and they are burnt." Would a member of my family or a dear friend or relative be one of these branches if they did not practice their faith or share mine? And what about all those good, spiritually-minded and decent human beings who belong to a different faith or to none at all? Will they be hacked off and thrown on the fire? No, I do not believe so. It does not make sense to me in the light of the gospel message or the life of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, our soul is like a miniature vine, with branches growing out into our life in the world – and some of these branches do not bear good fruit: an unkind tongue, a heart full of bitterness, cynicism or contempt, a tendency to gossip or to bear grudges. These branches in our soul the Lord himself will prune so that the vine of our soul will bear only good fruit. Jesus refers to this

in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, when the landowner, who sowed wheat in his field, found weeds growing up alongside it. The parable goes on:

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where then do the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. So the servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he said, ‘if you pull the weeds now, you might uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat into my barn.’”

In this life then, we may have to live with the weeds growing in our soul, the branches we put out into the world that do not bear good fruit; but in the Lord’s own time he himself will pull the weeds up and prune us – and what is left will be all the goodness in us, all the love and kindness that has ever lit up our life. We are all a mixture of weeds and wheat and we always will be. The Reformer Martin Luther (whom I am not frequently given to quoting) said that we are *simul Justus et peccator* – simultaneously saint and sinner. The Franciscan contemporary spiritual writer Richard Rohr has said:

“That’s the mystery of holding weeds and wheat together in our one field of life. It takes a lot more patience, compassion, forgiveness and love, than aiming for some illusory perfection that is usually blind to its own faults. Acknowledging both the wheat and weeds in us keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves and also from dismissing ourselves as terrible.

“To avoid cynicism and negativity, you have to learn to accept and forgive this mixed bag of reality that you are—and everyone else is, too. If you don’t, you’ll likely become a very angry person. To accept the weeds doesn’t mean that you say, “It’s okay to be ignorant and evil.” It means to have some real wisdom about yourself. You can see your weeds and acknowledge when you are not compassionate or caring. You have to name the weed as a weed: I’m not perfect; you’re not perfect; the Church is not perfect (...)” Life itself is not perfect. Neither is it our job to try and make ourselves perfect in this life – that is the work of God’s grace in through the Holy Spirit, who is the Sanctifier. Our job is to care for the garden of our soul as faithfully as we can (an image frequently used by Clement of Alexandria), remain authentically humble and depend totally on the loving mercy of God, who will himself do all the necessary pruning and trimming in his own time.

Our connectedness of being with God in Christ won't make our problems go away; it won't pay the mortgage or help us cope with unemployment; it won't save us from suffering, from illness or bereavement; it won't make life trouble-free; it certainly won't make us 'happy' in the conventional sense of that word – in any case, the purpose of life is not happiness but meaning.