

Context

Between the Passover feast in the upper room (where Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the last supper with bread and wine while John describes Jesus washing his disciple's feet and commanding them to do the same for each other) and Jesus betrayal and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane at the base of the Mount of Olives; in John's Gospel we have a farewell speech given by Jesus spanning chapters 14-17 finishing with prayer for himself, those who the Father gave him and all who would believe in him (including us!). It is usually assumed that the audience is Jesus' 12 disciples, partly because the few parts of these chapters which include interaction only includes people named as one of the 12. However nothing is stated, and if you read from chapter 11 where Jesus spends time with his friends in Bethany and raises Lazarus from the dead, you could assume the audience includes these friends and some of the crowd which gathered in Bethlehem and followed to Jerusalem. What is clear, the audience is Jesus close followers who he has invested in and will now share the inside details of God's amazing plan even if they will not understand. The plan is submission, suffering, death, resurrection and sending the gift of the Spirit to be far more than a source of power for one-off interventions into human history. A new word which is difficult to translate is needed – 'paraclete' (advocate, comforter, counsellor, convictor) – to impart the importance of permanent relationship, abiding and remaining, to be to every believer what Jesus was to his closest disciples and followers during his 3 year ministry. The style of this section of the Gospel is different from the rest of John but the themes of holiness, truth and friendship connecting Father, Jesus, Spirit and Jesus followers connect it to the rest of John. Jesus describes why he must go away. One of the reasons is so that we can all have the relationship with the Holy Spirit which he has demonstrated since he was baptised.

The image of the vine

Read John 15:1-17. With the context in mind, talk through or draw on paper the image Jesus is describing. These questions may help you get this picture clear:

- Who is the gardener?
- What is the purpose of the gardener?
- How will he fulfil this purpose?
- Who is the vine? What is the purpose of the vine?
- Ask the same for the branches and fruit?
- How many times does the word "remain" appear: why is this important? (you might want to think about Jesus Baptism story here)

Then look for and discuss the following words: what do they mean in context, why are they important for us:

- Pruning
- Fruitful
- Glory
- Love
- Commands
- Joy
- Choose
- Known
- Disciples, servants, masters, friends (look at these words together)

In this part of the Gospel, the way Jesus speaks entwines and repeats so many themes that the language is beautiful and poetic but can be hard to follow. Hopefully you should now have a clearer image of what Jesus is saying in its context.

Ask one of the group to read the passage slowly out loud to the group. Wait on God quietly for a while, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal what God is saying to us here and now about this passage. Then share with the group.

Some final questions:

- How do you feel about the pruning part of the image? Are you/we up for that?
- How can we make sure we remain in the vine?
- What does the fruit look like, and do we see any?
- What are the implications of us being chosen by God?

Final thought:

In John's Gospel Jesus describes a number of people, many of them women or outcasts, who Jesus seems to treat as friends and share close spiritual thoughts with, in addition to the 12 disciples. As you read about Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Simon the Leper, the woman at the well and the way Jesus interacts with them the word 'friends' is not used but seems implied; especially as the Gospel progresses and Jesus seems to take comfort from the people living in Bethany as well as minister to them. In the case of the woman at the well and Mary he shares deep spiritual truths with them before others understand get to know, about the nature of worship, the role of the Holy Spirit and Jesus identity as the Messiah. This resonates with this passage as Jesus speaks about making known to them all of his Father's business, which makes them friends. This becomes part of the explanation of why Jesus must go away – so that they can all become his friends, not servants following a master without understanding the master's business. Maybe this also brought those closest to Jesus together – all of them friends, even if the society they lived in could only understand the concept of a Rabbi choosing a group of male disciples. And for us, the concept that Jesus calls us friends and shares all of his Father's business with us, is a beautiful and astounding concept. The creator and rescuer of the universe would share all the family secrets with us, and call us his friends.