

Reflection for Sunday 2 May

It has not been a great year for owners of vineyards. After catastrophic fires in California, spring frost has caused chaos in Europe, with vineyards touched as far south as Lazio, near Rome. In France, where 15% of the economy is dependent on viticulture, the losses have been catastrophic in places. Half the crop has been lost in Burgundy and the Beaujolais and even 40% on the Mediterranean coastal strip.

I have received tens of emails from distraught growers and others trying ever so hard to put a brave face on things. April's severe frosts, the worst in living memory in some places, were all the more destructive because spring had hitherto been warm and settled. The season was just too advanced for its own good.

Just as the Bible uses the familiar agricultural images of sheep farming to illustrate the nature of God's relationship with Israel – and by extension with us too, so it is that the cultivation of vines, figs and olives figures large in the imagination of Old Testament writers and of Jesus himself. It's easier to explain important and potentially challenging ideas if you can relate them to everyday life. And those plants mattered a great deal in ancient Palestine.

Everyone who heard Jesus preach and teach would very probably know someone who struggled with the back-breaking job of winter and spring pruning in the vineyards and what might happen to your crop and your income if you didn't take proper care of your estate.

The idea of owning a vineyard may seem like the fulfilment of a dream afforded only by those living in the lap of luxury, but take it from me, trying to grow grapes can be as grinding and unforgiving as sheep farming is here, and no more profitable for the majority of those in the industry. Healthy vines are essential if you're going to succeed in any way. The best pruners are bold and to the untrained eye, ruthless.

It would be abundantly clear to those who read Isaiah's, Jeremiah's and especially Ezekiel's grim prophecies inspired by vineyards that failed to come up to scratch that when Jesus took up the theme of God as the vineyard owner - and us as vines, some hard, home truth were just around the corner.

Of course, they were right. And the image of Jesus as the vine and us as the vulnerable, all-too disappointing branches seems a long way from the comforting image of Jesus the Good Shepherd caring for us, his sheep.

Our job, it seems, is simply to stick in there and do our best. Abiding in Jesus means faithfulness, steadfastness and above all else, perhaps, perseverance.

But let's not take the vine imagery too far. Jesus and John use it to make a general point, not to develop a celestial handbook on viticulture with every detail of vineyard work some deeply meaningful metaphor or allegory.

The main lesson, which has, perhaps, two sides to it is very simply that vines that don't produce fruit are neither use nor ornament and that branches that are cut off from the main plant have even less value.

And yet, we're not expected to somehow bear fruit out of thin air. We'll only bear fruit if we're part of the vine. In fact, our job, if you like as branches, is to stay attached and let the rest of the vine strut its stuff together. Vines without some of their vital parts, be they branches, roots or leaves are as disabled as bodies missing vital organs.

There's something deeply comforting in this. It's not all down to us. We're not on our own, we don't have to do anything we're not capable of doing. If we're part of the vine that is Jesus, a crop ought to be assured. It all then comes back to abiding: to faithfulness, steadfastness and perseverance.

How do we go about doing this? Two things strike me as being fairly obvious. The first is to stick with the church. Despite its many obvious faults, its frost damage and the experience of being burnt at the edges, the church is pretty essential. It can be frustrating and disappointing, but that's a vine for you. And a church. We need one another and no more so than in the church.

The second is all that body of confusing and sometimes frustratingly obscure literature that we call Holy Scripture. Yes, it's profoundly odd in places, but it's also an amazing and utterly fascinating account of how other people have tried to relate to God – have been faithful, have managed to persevere, as well as a priceless record of what Jesus did and said. Despite its many quirks and curiosities, it has got to be on my Desert Island, and I hope on yours too.

The third is the need to hang onto a sense of wonder that sees God active in the ordinary things of life as well as in those events that seem wonderful in a narrow, limiting sense. The very point of reflecting on such bothersome everyday things as sheep, figs, olives and vines is that they are so ordinary and, for the most part, humdrum. Which leads straight to my final point, which is that God is to be found right here, holding together the things we take for granted.

We're invited (or called) to see it, delight in it and recognise that it's in ordinary things, rather than the special, that life proves most fruitful. It's in the ordinary experiences of life that we find love – and finding love is, after all, what Jesus offers to us – and offers above all else.