

Quiet Fruit

There are plenty of instances in the New Testament, and especially in John, where Jesus reveals pieces himself through comparison and metaphor, using the precise phrase “I am”. To be specific, there are seven or eight, depending on if you count the “Before Abraham was, I am” etc., and this is the last of them, spoken two pages away from Jesus’ arrest and condemnation. Not that any statement of Jesus should be elevated and adored against or over any others, but one does wonder whether what special significance might be attached.

Honestly at first glance the choice of vines as the extended metaphor seems dull. Everyone can relate to the good shepherd’s sacrifice, or the door and the light in their open and fulfilling nature, the bread satisfying enormous hungers, and so forth. Jesus’ statements in the past reveal the actions he intends to do, the joy he intends to bring, and the figure he chooses to be.

As the kids would say, hash-tag rip/vine. A vine produces fruit quietly, and only brings joy to its customers after some maturation of its fruit. Vines are not light to the whole world; they remain as they are, until someone decides to do something with them. I should mention that despite my parents’ best efforts, I am no wine connoisseur, so I acknowledge some bias. Yet when one looks at Jesus’ current predicament, steps away from arrest, it would seem that he’d go with the hopeful “I am the light” or the relevant “I am the good shepherd, laying down my life for the sheep.”

It is nonetheless the disciples to whom Jesus speaks, and the disciples need reassurance. Events are proceeding at a pace and meaning beyond their current level of understanding, and that feeling is one we can recall from experience. Jesus has already foretold his betrayal and pinpointed the man

who will ultimately be responsible. Thus Jesus starts with “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” and the wonderful passage culminating in the promise of a new way, a way to God through his son, Jesus.

The reassurance of the vine is the reassurance of the intertwined fate of Jesus and his disciples. Whatever comes, Jesus will be with them, and their harmonious relationship, if properly maintained and pruned, will last as long as time. Just as Jesus shared in the pain of the world, the disciples find themselves heirs to his life and all that that life has meant.

The passage of Jesus explaining himself and his purpose follows a logical structure, therefore, with the “I am the vine” giving hope to the branches, that we may bear fruit in our turn. The right path may see us re-enacting the role of the shepherd, or the giver of light, or a thousand other ways in which we might humbly offer our own interpretations of the classic question, What Would Jesus Do? But it provides the best comfort to know that one shares roots of the deepest kind with Jesus, that of a tree and its branches.

A piece of Jesus, part of his strong statements with the phrase “I am,” is his unity with us in every way necessary. If we abide in Jesus then everything follows in due course; if not then we realize the absence and long for that relationship to spring anew. This is how Jesus can call his disciples and eventually us his friends, and work with us as we struggle through the dark days, months, ...and years of our lives.

Jesus laid down his life as he said he would do, hoping that we would continue to produce in him. Even if we cannot match his example of giving light to the world, we benefit from knowing how we stand with God, and be the best branch we can be.