

# The Allegory of the Vine: An Exposition of John 15: 1-17

GEORGE JOHNSTON

WITH the allegory of the True Vine in chapter fifteen of the Fourth Gospel we are in what many feel to be the Holy of Holies in the biblical record of our Lord's words and work. Dying men have turned to these farewell discourses to find comfort and assurance, because here they have encountered One who was about to die—and to conquer! Not less the living seek here blessed words of hope and strength: "Let not your hearts be troubled!" Over and over again the risen Christ has mediated transforming spiritual power to his disciples, even those who have not seen him and yet have believed. (John writes in the knowledge that the Resurrection Appearances are past.) Christ meets human need through his words, which are available within the written records of the New Testament and are interpreted to the faithful by the divine Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth (cf. John 14:16f., 25-27; 15:26f.). Since his words are "spirit and truth" (John 6:63), they communicate himself, the Son of the Father and the Saviour of the world. Hence the expositor or the preacher who sits down humbly and expectantly before the living Lord in his Gospel will be given a "word" for his congregation or readers. For the Christ will be present anew within the fellowship of faith and learning. Few of his students will ever forget the intensity of feeling with which the late Dr. Arthur Gossip used to begin his lectures on Preaching. For him the office of the preacher was very sacred, and he would tell his students that one who stands in the pulpit confronts the infinite needs of his fellow men and women. He ought therefore to bring with him from the hidden place of study and prayer a message that conveys the infinite resources of almighty God for the situation of the day. In this chapter of St. John there are lessons that cry out to be preached: lessons on the friendship of Christ, on Christian obedience, on the duty of witnessing, and on the joy of communion with the Father and the Son.

## I

The larger context of 15:1-17 is, of course, that of 13:2, "during supper." Here Jesus is engaged in the Last Supper with the men whom God gave him out of the world and whom he has loved to the end. Naturally one asks what relationship the allegory has to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper which stands in direct continuity with that Last Supper on the night in which he was betrayed.

John does not provide a narrative of how the sacrament was instituted,

although at the same juncture in the story of Jesus the Synoptic Gospels do so (cf. Mark 14:17ff.). There must be a reason for the omission, but it has proved extremely difficult to discover it. Perhaps John was protesting in this way against sacramentalism or a corruption of it; perhaps his materials were gathered from a set of eucharistic sermons and he conceived that his message could be better expounded in relation to the "I AM" saying about the Bread of Life in chapter 6; it may even be that on this point there was a quite different tradition in the Johannine circle from that of the Pauline and the Synoptic. Whatever the reason, John is surely one who understands the meaning of "sacramental," for he understands the Incarnation of the divine in the human. "The Word was made flesh" need not mean that the eternal Logos, the Son of God, was transformed into material flesh, yet it must mean that the material is taken up into a unique relation with the spiritual. Hence in chapter 6 Jesus says that the disciple must eat him, then he explains that this is to eat his flesh and blood, and finally he suggests that it is only the Spirit that matters. "My words are spirit and life" (6:56ff.).

In the allegory no use is made of the fact that wine is closely related to the Vine, so that the sacramental idea is far below the surface. John's primary lesson here is rather that obedience to Christ is the essential condition for being in true communion with him. But surely that is not far removed from the meaning of "eating me" or "eating my flesh and drinking my blood" in 6:56ff.? Those who make the Eucharist the whole centre of the Christian life should perhaps ask themselves if obedience to the divine will is not more important than "making one's communion" at the Eucharist or the Mass. "Abide in me, and I in you . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (15:4, 9). Put alongside that verse the words of 6:57: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father," and of 4:34: "My meat is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work." The complication that arises in the parallelism between Christ and the disciples is this: we should expect to be told that it is the business of the disciple to do the will of his Lord and accomplish the work given to him (cf. 13:15; 14:12, 15). But although John says so plainly enough in the farewell discourses, in chapter 6 he puts the point in terms of "eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of man." It must be that Jesus Christ stands in a special relation to the Church as Mediator, precisely as we read in Matt. 11:27. The Son has immediate knowledge of the Father; but the Church knows the Father (whom no man has seen or can see) only in the Son (14:9). Thus for the life of the Church and its communion with God it is essential that Christ and his disciples be one Humanity (cf. Heb. 2:11). In the Synoptics this is put in the form, "where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst" (Matt. 18:20). Paul describes this fellowship under the concepts of the Body of Christ (cf. John 2:21), the New Man, the Seed of Abraham. John has the same sort of idea in mind, because he begins by saying here that Jesus is the true Vine, that is, the true "Israel of God." He and his friends

together constitute the People. And so the People must find the secret of vitality and purpose in "feeding upon Christ." The emphasis on the flesh and blood in 6:56ff. is parallel to the clear statement of the Prologue, that the Word "became flesh." John is not so interested in the sacramental elements that represent the flesh and blood, as in the true manhood of the Saviour which is the exemplar of Christian manhood. The obedience of the Son has for its counterpart the obedience of the disciple to the Lord Jesus Christ. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (15:10; cf. 2:5; 5:8; 7:17; and 11:43). The theme is quite general, but presumably the obedience required may be applied to sacramental worship, to the life of the disciple in the world, and to the inner, private religious life. The only specific commands in view here are the love of one another within the narrow circle of believers, and the obligation to proclaim the Gospel to others. It is characteristic of the Johannine mind that it should hold together the ideas of the Church as a close-knit, exclusive fellowship and of the Church as a missionary society sent out into the world in the Name of One who is the Saviour of the world. Strength for the latter is derived from the former, because only a Church that lives in close union with its Head, the risen Lord, can have the fortitude, the conviction of truth, and the power of patient love essential to the missionary task in this evil world. We are called to obedience if we would enjoy communion; and the more profound the union, the more perfect will be the obedience.

## II

We come now to the concept of the Vine as such.

Stewart Perowne in his recent volume, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great*, describes the Temple which Herod began to build and did not complete before his death. Above the door in the entrance to the Holy Place, "a magnificent golden vine spread its tendrils and hung its bunches of grapes, which, to be seen at such a height, were as tall as a man." Jesus and his disciples were familiar with the Vine, for it is one of the symbols for Israel, the covenanted People of God. The commentators refer to Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Ezek. 19:10-13; Jer. 2:21; and Ps. 80:8-19. What Jesus means to say is, "I am the true Israel." In his own person he embodied the chosen People of God. Modern men in the West may find it hard to understand that one man should represent a whole nation, but the Jews understood. It was not strange to them that Adam meant mankind or that the sacral King incorporated the entire nation or that on the Day of Atonement the High Priest standing before God is virtually Israel. This sense of solidarity helps to explain the Pauline teaching about the Body of Christ and the Seed of Abraham (1 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:16). A measure of what is involved comes to those who imaginatively feel themselves taking part in bygone historical events or spiritually identify themselves with their ancestors. An example of the former will be found in *Our Hearts Were*

*Young and Gay* by Cornelia Otis Skinner and Emily Kimbrough, who stood one day on the very spot where Joan of Arc was martyred; and an example of the latter in Neil Munro's story, "The Lost Pibroch", in *Scottish Short Stories*, ed. Hendry. In the Fourth Gospel the theme of Jacob who is Israel lies behind the language at 1:51; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; as well as 2:21 (the Temple is the House of God, and thus "Bethel"). It may be observed too that the Vine and the "Son of Man" images appear in Ps. 80:8, 15-17, where the poet prays for the restoration of Israel to the favour of God. This may be one source of the "Son of Man" idea in John. Like the first disciples this writer declares that the hopes and images of the Old Testament were "fulfilled" in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the Father, although unbelievers thought that Jesus was merely the son of Joseph of Nazareth (John 1:45; 6:42). The real glory of Jesus is that in him the eternal Word of God became incarnate, that he suffered and died as victor over sin and death, and that he has returned to the divine glory. On the other hand, incarnation meant that the Word was made flesh within Israel, the nation of the covenant, the promises, and the sonship (cf. Rom. 9:4f.).

This claim underlines the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his right to be served as sole Lord and Saviour. For this reason the Church properly asserts that he is greater than Moses, different from David, superior to Aaron, and that he must never be reduced to the level of any Eastern *avatar*. It is not enough therefore to preach "Jesus," if by that is meant simply the Jew who loved children and befriended the outcast and taught an ethic of brotherly love. Such a presentation is to be heard among unitarians in Canada, although some unitarians here go so far as to advertize that they are not even Christian. St. John the evangelist believed in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and in the Paraclete, the divine Spirit of Truth, who proceeds from the Father and is sent by Christ (15:26). The Church catholic has declared over and over again that this trinitarian faith alone can do justice to the saving work of Christ, the revealer of God and the Saviour of the world. It is this Gospel that the preacher is called to offer to Canada and to all the nations.

Next, if the Vine be Israel, it must follow that the true People of God is to be found in the community of Jesus' disciples, the Church. They are branches on the Vine, sustained by its life, and dead apart from it. Christ and his Church belong inseparably together—a lesson taught elsewhere in terms of the Body and the Bride (1 Cor. 12:12ff.; Eph. 4 and 5; Rev. 22). It is astonishing to discover that a local synagogue of Jews (non-Christian, of course) is sometimes a member of the "council of churches" in an American city and that Buddhists venture to use the word "church" of their society. (The *Toronto Globe and Mail* in its weekly edition is just as lax in the employment of the word "church.") In the New Testament, however, "church" is a Christian term, and the Church of God takes its character from God's being the one and only God and from Christ's being the true Vine, the unique Saviour.

Doubtless some critics will say that this is horribly narrow-minded. Is the

Church to be thought of as a limited coterie of the spiritual élite, and will it survive only by a policy of rigorous exclusivism? John would reply, No. The Church is the community of those who love as Christ loves and who seek to glorify the Father. God so loved the world as to give his Son to death for its salvation. The Church is bound to be humble, gracious, patient, and forgiving if it would be true to its Lord. Its duty is to be missionary and to win the "Greeks," that is, the men and women who need the love of God and his truth in Christ but are still outside. For Christ has other sheep whom he would gather (10:16), and Christ exalted on the Cross will draw all men to himself (12:32). We must also take note that the Church is no self-appointed guardian of the divine purpose, nor simply a gathered community of the like-minded. The Church is the creation of the Son of God: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you. . ." (15:16; cf. 20:21-23). God is the Vine-dresser, who prunes the branches and casts out those that are withered (and these branches are individuals, not "denominations"—John had never heard of "denominations"! ) So high and wonderful are the calling and glory of the Church of God in Jesus Christ!

If this biblical idea is to be expounded aright, then congregations have to be lifted up to a vision of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the Vine that feeds on Christ and serves his will in the world. Far off on the prairie plains, far north amid Arctic tundra along the DEW Line, to the west among the Indians of British Columbia and to the east where wild Atlantic gales blow themselves out, the knowledge of what it means "to be the Church" has to be made manifest. No group is too small, too remote, too unlearned for the communication of this message. In the Sunday liturgy, by sermon and drama, by missionary news, by film and radio, by bulletins from Geneva, Canterbury, or New York, by personal visits from Churchmen of other lands, the message of the Church can be brought to both ministers and their people. And it must be. For Canada, like every other nation in the atomic age, needs to see God's Church in her midst, united, loving, truthful, forgiving, and doing its proper work by the grace of God.

### III

"No longer slaves . . . but friends" (verses 12-15) strikes one as very odd in a discourse so spiritually profound as this. To grasp the full significance of the words it is necessary to remember that the Christ is the divine Son who must be honoured like his Father (5:23), that he is the good Shepherd, the royal Head of the people (10:1ff.), that he is Master or Teacher (*Rabboni*, 20:16). In each case the title has about it an ancient splendour. There is here no constitutional sovereignty, because for John and his time a King truly reigns, a Master has authority over his students, a Shepherd is one with powers of life and death. Hence there is nothing surprising in the idea that the disciples exist to serve the Lord's will. What is remarkable is that in this service there is a perfect freedom. "If the Son

makes you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36). "If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my *deacon* (servant) be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honour him" (12:26). Again, when we remember how the Gospel begins ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh"), it is breath-taking to watch the scene in the Upper Room where the Master and Teacher girds himself to wash the feet of his disciples, like any slave! This sublime example is given to the men of God for their own life: "blessed are you if you do them" (13:17). John seems to be reproducing in his own idiom a thought that is found in the tradition of the Sayings of Jesus both in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 10:24f.; Luke 6:40. "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master.")

There is no reason why the example of Jesus should be played down in the instruction given to churches about the life of a Christian. His life of sacrificial love, kindness, prayer, and complete devotion to God is the true type. Every faltering Christian who walks in his steps will cry out that the thing is too big, too demanding for him; and he will be correct. But failures in the Christian life arise when disciples step out of that narrow way Jesus walked or take their eyes off him who is the ideal (cf. Heb. 12:2f.). If this be true for the general body of the congregation, how much more for the pastors and the priests!

Once again the note of obedience is sounded: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." In the first instance the "greater love has no man than this" applies to Jesus himself. The Cross is the mighty deed that proves the word proclaimed by Jesus. He laid down his life in order to win friends and create the Church, and so doing he revealed what the Father is and what his purpose is, because they who have seen him have seen the Father. This may seem like an assertion of a dogmatic truth, and indeed it is; for John assumes that Jesus is the divine Word and Saviour. But then the whole business of his book, writes John (20:31), is to show Jesus as the Son of God who can give eternal life to the believer. Once a man has felt the impact of love from the crucified, once he has understood how common and mean is his life compared with that of Jesus, and how he is himself tied up with all the men and women who brought about the death of Jesus, he begins to see that in truth the final Reality is present in the Christ to judge and to redeem. Dogmatic statement then becomes the proclamation of his faith. It is the friends of Jesus who can write 1 John 1:1-4 or John 3:11 ("we speak of what we know").

"Greater love has no man than this" next applies to the friends, because in this Gospel the friend is one who has become a child of God (1:12). John may be thinking tenderly of the first martyrs who did give their lives in testimony to their Lord (e.g. Antipas of Pergamum or Polycarp of Smyrna). Many names might be cited of those who have followed this

example throughout the centuries; but that might also discourage the ordinary Christian. It would be excellent self-discipline if all those who sing heartily, "What a friend we have in Jesus," would ask themselves, "What kind of a friend does Jesus have in me?" For that is one way of putting the meaning of the Last Judgment. In the parable of Matt. 25:31ff. the answer is given in terms of what one has done for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner—unawares. Like Simon and Matrëna in Tolstoy's story, *What Men Live By*, men may entertain angels in the guise of the forsaken or even the Christ in the person of his tired and sinful ones. What kind of a friend? Judas and Peter both called themselves the friends of Jesus. Many who gamble with the money required for their family's support or waste their lives in fruitless enterprises are on the rolls of the churches. Some who fight about secondary matters of Church polity or treat their neighbours in other denominations with contempt, also describe themselves as the friends of Jesus. On the other side, it is good to remember that Peter and John were so transformed and enabled by the Spirit of God that the Sanhedrin took note of them that they had been with Jesus. In the second world war hundreds of very ordinary Christians in New Guinea, Burma, China, Japan and India displayed remarkable graces of the same Spirit. What sort of friend? Whether we are called Catholics or Evangelicals, Presbyterians or Baptists, Canadians or Koreans, we bear an awful responsibility when we are tagged with this name, "the friends of Jesus."

#### IV

John 15 has in mind not only the Betrayal Night, for it comes to us out of the life of the established Church with its sacraments, its pastors and missionaries, its heretics and also its enemies. Five times it is said that fruitfulness is essential to the vitality of the Vine (verses 2, 4, 5, 8, 16). What is meant by this? The Vine needs soil, rain and sun; it must be tended and pruned. John indicates that whatever corresponds to these in the spiritual life of the Church and the believer is the province of God, on whom we are utterly dependent for life and forgiveness. But the branches bear fruit only by being active in the service of the Gospel. At this point the static image of the Vine breaks down. John apparently does not want to suggest that the graces of individual sanctity are the "blossoms" or the "fruit" of the Vine. Rather he drops the image in order to make his point: "I appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (verse 16). The concept of "going" is just as important as that of "abiding." To go is to make obedience perfect; and it is in obedience, we saw above, that communion is deepened. There need be no fear that in going the disciple is leaving the safety of the vineyard or the shelter of the Master's presence. "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). Quite clearly John has in mind the missionary task of the Church (cf. 4:34-38; 13:16; 20:19-23; 21:15-17). The eleven faithful men, not least Peter,

are met in the Upper Room as representative of the whole Church (a comment of F. J. A. Hort). What was said to them is being said now to the Church.

Not every Christian, however, is willing to "go." Many seem to regard the Church as a haven of rest and the Christian religion as a spiritual "Florida-experience." They are the tired and bruised men and women who need the comfort of the Gospel, and they are everyone at some stage of life. Christ is for them, too. Nevertheless, it is questionable if in this age of anxiety it is adequate to treat the faith as some kind of tranquilizer pill or to make the Church a place of retreat. Different people have different needs, so that one must recognize the good that is done from time to time by the Peale form of Christianity. In personal life, too, as in history there are moments for withdrawal and others for advance. George F. MacLeod has used this pattern in the work of the Iona Community in Scotland, where members spend the summer months in study, prayer and work on the island and the winter months in Church Extension areas, in factories, and in mission fields wherever the Gospel needs to be brought to bear on modern social and political problems. In France the Jocist movement embodies a similar pattern. Our day has seen a recovery of the insight that even the ordinary Christian must learn to "go." It is not enough to receive the blessings; one must share the blessings with others. Moreover, it is hardly adequate to offer to the people of this age an individualistic piety that covers up ignorance or indifference about the troubles of national and international life with the hope that the saving of individuals will ultimately lead to the Kingdom of God on earth. Fruitful witnessing must be more realistic about the Naspers of the world and the rival programme of fascist or communist messiahs.

There is probably no aspect of contemporary Church life that needs greater clarification than this, and the pages of this *Journal* might well be used for its discussion. It is not easy to explain to the ordinary member (so-called) what the apostolate of the laity means. It is even more difficult if the crowds pouring into the churches of Canada today are seekers rather than witnesses. One may hesitate therefore to propose that willingness to share in the evangelical work of the Church should become a test for membership. And yet it is reported that the late Bishop Azariah of Dornakal in India used to make his catechumens promise to do this very thing. Whatever answers may be given, it remains true that evangelism as an activity of the whole congregation is a primary function.

The rewards of obedience are staggering: "so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. . . . These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be fulfilled" (15:11, 16). He who said this is the One "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2). As the conqueror he is able to offer his friends the peace that the world cannot give nor take away, and the power of the Holy Spirit which enables the faithful to accomplish "greater things" for the good of man and the coming of the divine Kingdom.

Over all is written the Eleventh Commandment: "that you love one another as I have loved you." Baron von Hügel used to say that "Christianity taught us to care," and there is surely no neater definition of the faith. In every age young men and old, children and women, have seen in the life and example of the Lord Jesus what it means for God to love us and for us to love one another. Love like this puts to shame the jingoism of the nations; the cruel character assassinations indulged in by fearful men who are willing to use slander, gossip and insinuation, and direct accusation without fair trial; and the *apartheid* policies of all who despise the people of other cultures, other continents, or another colour. "Love one another, as I have loved you" is an impossible command, nevertheless it is the law by which the Church must live and work. By the grace of God, and only by his grace in the lives of willing servants and friends of Christ, can love be born and grow into the mature likeness of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Saviour of the world, the Real Vine.