“I am the true vine, … my Father is the gardener … you are the branches”. In adopting the metaphor of the vine, the Gospel of John seeks to describe the relationship between God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian. So what is he saying?

First of all, a vine is a living thing that grows and bears fruit. In hot countries, like Palestine, vines also provide shelter from the sun bearing down. But in this passage, the focus is on the vine as a source of life, growth, and fruitfulness. As with the vine, so with Jesus: he is the God-given source of life, growth, and fruitfulness. “My Father is the gardener;” says Jesus, “I am the vine”.

“I am the vine; you are the branches”. The relationship between Christ and the Christian is organic. The Christian is an extension of Christ. Christ-the-vine communicates the vital, creative, fruitful, and indeed death-defying power of God to the Christian.

However, in order for the Christian to be a locus of this vitality and fruitfulness, she must remain organically connected. She must “remain in” Christ. But how?

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you …”. For us to be branches of the life-giving Vine, for us to remain “in Christ”, requires his “words” to remain in us.

Which words? The answer comes beyond this morning’s reading, in verse 10 of the same chapter: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love”.

Which commands? Verses 12-13 tell us: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends”.

The key, then, to our participation in the divine, creative, fruitful, death-defying life that Christ communicates is to follow his command by imitating his self-sacrificial love.
As it happens, our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, confirms what the Gospel is saying here. For the part of Scripture that Philip found the Ethiopian eunuch reading, and on the basis of which he then proceeded to expound “the good news about Jesus”, was the passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah about the Suffering Servant: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice”. As with Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, so with Jesus: “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; … by his wounds we are healed” (Is. 53.5). Jesus sacrificed himself for us—he laid down his life for his friends.

Our reading from the First Epistle of John develops these same points but in a different manner. The metaphor of the vine and its organic growth and extension is dropped. Love moves to centre-stage as a kind of vital energy or power that emanates from God, is expressed in Christ, and in which the Christian participates. So the Epistle tells us: “love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God…. …. God lives in us and his love is made complete in us…. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him”.

Love, of course, comes in many forms, and it’s important for us to know what kind of love the Epistle has in mind. There are no surprises here: it’s the self-sacrificial kind. As we heard earlier: “This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him…. he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins”.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that our three readings this morning affirm that self-sacrificial love is the key to Christian life, the key to our participation in the life of God, which is the eternal life that overcomes death.

‘There can be no doubt’: a ‘but’ is implied there, and a ‘but’ is indeed forthcoming. Notwithstanding the Christian centrality of self-sacrificial love, some qualifications need to be added. That’s because the self-sacrificial love can be problematic. Does it mean that those who are constantly taken for-granted, presumed upon, side-lined, ignored, pushed around, and even physically or sexually abused must simply play door-mat and absorb whatever comes their way? Is that really what Christian love requires? Christian feminists, sensitive to the historic plight of many women, have long said, No! And they must be right.
The Gospels themselves suggest that self-sacrificial love is not always appropriate. For they show that Jesus himself was not always passive and silent in the face of abuse. Faced with Pharisees abusing their religious authority to lord it over lesser mortals, Jesus typically became very vocal and fiercely aggressive in his denunciation of them. So in the 23rd chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we find him saying: “Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but you yourselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them!” And there’s a lot more where that came from.

It is significant, of course, that Jesus’ active opposition to abuse here is made on behalf of other people, not himself. This has been noticed by much of Christian tradition—not least by St Augustine and Martin Luther—who have ruled that, while defending others against abuse is consonant with Christian love, defending oneself is not.

However, that distinction is not always a clear one, since my failure to defend myself against wrong might leave the perpetrator at liberty to proceed to wrong others. Self-defence in such a case would be the defence of others. Still, the rationale would hold that self-defence is permissible only when mounted for the sake of other people.

However, even if self-defence is sometimes permitted for a Christian, even if self-sacrifice is not the only form that Christian love can take, it remains the case that fighting back is morally and spiritually dangerous. This is because the indignant resentment that injustice naturally provokes easily spins out of control, so that what began as self-defence quickly grows into unjust aggression, the victim morphs into fresh perpetrator, and the original injustice is obscured. Victims, too, are sinners, vulnerable to overwhelming passions of self-righteousness, rage, hatred, and vengefulness. It might be possible to be angry without sinning, as St Paul enjoined the Christians at Ephesus, but we shouldn’t presume upon it. For love to control anger takes a great deal of moral and spiritual maturity.

Sometimes, therefore, it is best not to fight back. Sometimes it’s best to forebear. Sometimes it’s best to forego—to sacrifice—vindication. Best, lest the risk of letting sinful, destructive passion get the upper hand.

Yet, to forego vindication is not entirely passive. It is not, in fact, to do nothing. Sometimes fighting back muddies the waters, when the victim’s subsequent injustices obscure the perpetrator’s original one. In that case, not to retaliate is to let the original wrong stand and show itself for what it is. It’s to let it condemn itself from its own mouth—to expose it. Indeed, this is how the author of the Letter to the Colossians...
understood Jesus’ self-sacrificial passion, when he wrote: “[Jesus] disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him” (2.15).

Self-sacrificial love lies at the heart of the way in which Christians participate in the eternal, death-defying life of God. It’s what connects the branches to the Christ-vine, of which God is the source.

Self-sacrificial love doesn’t preclude the active defence of others; nor does it even preclude the public-spirited defence of the self.

Still, fighting back is always morally and spiritually dangerous, for the passion of anger is not easily tamed. So sometimes it’s best to forego vindication—to sacrifice it.

But the sacrifice of vindication is not simply passive. Sometimes it’s the only way of showing wrong for what it is.