

Sermon Easter 5 Sunday 27/4/2024

Deuteronomy 4:32-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

As I read this morning's Gospel when preparing this sermon, my mind wandered more than once to the state of my roses and other shrubs in my garden. They need pruning – and now even Jesus himself was admonishing me from the pages of Scripture. I have been so busy of late that my duty as a gardener to prune has fallen by the wayside.

That led me to reflect on how effective this parable or metaphorical story from John's Gospel is. In eight short verses, it likens God to the vine-grower and Jesus himself to the vine. It describes something about the proper care of plants and specifically vines that would have been all too familiar to Jesus's followers and listeners. They lived in an agrarian, Mediterranean society two thousand years ago. Imagery from agriculture and viticulture was very likely to be familiar to all his listeners.

They knew that, in order for a vine to produce fruit, it had to be pruned. If the vine-grower let it grow out of control, it would stop producing grapes. A vine that does not produce fruit is no use to anyone. This brings me back to worrying about my roses and the likely impact that my tardiness in pruning will cause – a lack of flowers. The blooms on roses are not just there for the aesthetic of course – they are an important food source for bees and insects. So by failing to prune, I am not only depriving myself of flowers with beautiful appearance and odour, I am also depriving insects and bees of the nutrients they need.

In today's parable, there are three key characters – God the Father as vine-grower, Jesus as the true vine and all of us who profess that we are Christians as the branches of the vine. This is a parable in which we are invested and engaged as listeners because we have been included as part of the story. We are told that God the vine-grower will prune us so that we may bear much fruit, but that if we fail to abide in Jesus the true vine, we will wither and be thrown on the fire. This all sounds rather stark and a bit frightening.

Jesus' use of the metaphor of the vine-grower for God the Father is an interesting one. At first glance, the image of God as the vine-grower who prunes all the vine's branches to enable them to produce good fruit and who discards and burns the unproductive branches seems to depict the Father as rather harsh, maybe even cruel.

If we took this parable as a stand-alone tale told by Jesus to teach his followers, it would be easy to interpret it this way – but in truth that would be a misinterpretation. Scholars of the Gospel parables note that, while each parable is a self-contained story, collectively they make an important contribution to the Gospel narratives and theology. They are best understood in the context of the unfolding story of the mission of Jesus in each Gospel. Jesus the teacher used parables to transform everyday, familiar stories into theological statements, helping his followers to deepen their understanding of God's will, thus supporting their faith journeys.

The selection of readings in the lectionary for each Sunday also supports our discernment. The task of the preacher is to unfold the Word which means seeking meaning and insight from all of the day's appointed readings. Therefore

my task is to explore how all of today's Sunday readings help us better understand Jesus' metaphor of God as vine-grower? Is Jesus saying that God is harsh? Is he telling us that God is cruel? Is he explaining that God is pruning us to punish us?

From Deuteronomy, we learn that God disciplines out of love, to encourage his people to keep his commandments. The letter from John tells us of the depth of God's love for us. This love is epitomised by Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross. If we can open ourselves fully and faithfully to God, John tells us that divine love will be perfected in us. These readings help us to understand that God prunes and disciplines in order to encourage the growth of our discipleship, and to lead us further along our faith journey.

Jesus' parables are stories in which truths are taught and these truths are aimed particularly at believers. Scholars argue that Jesus' parables are all concerned with naming the problems in the world he inhabited and in pointing to a better alternative. Jesus' parables talk about the potential there is in this world for transforming it to reflect the values of the kingdom of God. Such change requires a change in the behaviour of Jesus' followers so that we follow God's commandments and reflect his values in all that we do.

If the parables are intended to point towards the potential to transform the world, then they also point to the central role that we, the followers of Jesus, must play in enacting any such transformation. If we are to change our world to be a better, fairer, more loving and more Godly place, each of us first needs to be transformed in order to make that possible. Considered in this way, the metaphor of God as vine-grower who prunes us begins to make sense. In order

to bring about the kingdom of God, we ourselves need to be transformed. Opening ourselves up to God's pruning action in our lives begins to fit us for God's purpose.

Perhaps the first way that God's pruning action may impact my own life is in helping me to organise my time more effectively so that I have time to be the vine-grower in my own garden and prune my roses! That would enable me to transform my garden to a tidier and more beautiful place that would also be a better environment for the wildlife I want to encourage and care for.

Let us pray

Loving God, throughout human history, you have called your people to open ourselves to your discipline and guidance in our lives. You have asked us to allow ourselves to be pruned and shaped by you so that you can abide in us and so that we can follow Christ's call to hasten your kingdom. Give us the grace to respond to your call to us to transform our own selves and lives so that we can transform our world and let your kingdom come.

Amen