

Dreghorn and Springside Church: Sunday 2nd May 2021

Bible reading: John 15:1-8

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Sermon: cultivating a fruitful faith

It was on the midnight bell on Christmas day that all things changed. We went back into lockdown, a long four-month winter of disrupted living.

Just that day, Christmas day we had been celebrating, many of us with family as we remembered the reason for the season. Emmanuel which means God with us. Eugene Peterson, the translator of the Message version of the Bible conveys John 1:14 as, “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.” God with us, even though we were now separated.

This week we have seen some return to life as we knew it pre-lockdown. Gyms re-opening, to help us shed those lockdown pounds, cafes to help us put them all back on again and shops to help us spend them. Life has got that little bit richer...

And richer, deeper, more resoundingly life giving yet, our Bible reading for today, develops on this theme of ‘God with us’. It is being in union with Christ, in abiding in him that we live a life that is at its most fruitful and glorifies God.

The image of the vine and the vineyard is a rich one in our Holy Scriptures. Within Jewish tradition, the vine was the picture of Israel. God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land (Psalm 80:8-18). It had been ravaged by wild animals and it needed protecting and to be re-established. The vineyard of Israel, said Isaiah in chapter 5, had grown but had borne wild and bitter grapes instead of proper ones. Now Jesus is saying that he is the ‘True Vine’. This can only mean that he, himself is the true Israel. He is the one in whom, and through whom God’s redeeming and saving purpose now comes. And in turn, his followers are God’s true people.

So, we must remain in Jesus, be in touch, be in tune, with him, knowing him and being known by him. And we must also remain in touch with the Christian community that knows him and loves him and celebrates him as Lord. This has proven tricky over the last 14 months of COVID, so I hope and pray that through your personal and corporate Bible study and prayer, through your personal connections, through opportunities for loving service, through church magazines and bulletins and website updates, through Zoom Coffee break and through worship services online and audio, we have managed to remain together with Christ, abiding in him, as one family – glorifying the Father together.

In a previous manse, we once had neighbours who were great gardeners and one of their pride and joys was a vine that was kept in their greenhouse. They cared for it, pruned it, and were rewarded with a great harvest of grapes.

Eventually they moved on, leaving the vine to the next occupant who was a great cyclist, but not a great gardener, the vine was left to its own devices and grew and grew, eventually like Jack's beanstalk going on forever, up through the glass roof vents and out through the door. It was a gnarled mess of wood and leaves - and all the books will tell you that the quality of grape produced would decline, the more it was left to its own devices. In the image that we are given today, God is the gardener who cares for the vine, the dead bits are cut away and the pruning shears are used carefully and constructively to enhance the yield, to bring on good fruit.

Abiding in Christ and by extension in Christian community is a dynamic way to live. There are things that need cut off, particularly when we first know Christ as saviour. Jesus accepts us the way we are, no matter how broken and sinful and dragged through the mud that might be, he meets us there, and then God begins the process of helping us cut away the deadwood. By his Word and Spirit in his community he helps us see the things that are not healthy for the Christian life and helps us move on. These things may be unhealthy patterns of thought that can be. They may be old habits, because damaged thoughts lead on to damaged actions. Maybe there is a lifestyle you need to break free from, maybe a habit that's currently got the better of you, or a friendship that's now had its day.

And abiding in Christ and Christian community also means that we don't just go through this dead-wooding process and then we're all sorted. God continues to grow us and shape us - that's why ongoing prayer and Bible study, listening for the Spirit, living in community and living out the life of faith are all so important. God works in all these places, to help us be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

And though it always hurts, we must be ready for God's pruning knife. God is glorified, and so will we be, when we bear good quality fruit, and lots of it. For that to happen, there will be extra growth that needs cutting away. Now I'm no gardener, but I understand that this area of gardening is the most intimate of processes and does not suit a hack. The gardener, the vine dresser, is never closer to the vine, taking more thought over its long-term health and productivity, than when that gardener has knife in hand.

So, deadwood is cut away, we become more by pruning and the purpose of all of this is to produce good fruit, fruit that brings glory to the Father and marks us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This fruitful faith is seen in a life lived in worship, not just that hour on a Sunday or whenever we settle into this service. But whole life worship, glorifying God in the warp and the weave of your daily living. This fruitful faith takes Christianity away from the deformity that is just an hours 'worship' on a Sunday, and much more into the realms of whole life discipleship - whole week worship.

Fruitful faith is about glorifying God in all our relationships - remembering that all people, male and female, rich and poor, black and white and coloured, gay and straight, Catholic and Protestant, Hindu, Jew, and Moslem and all the rest, all people are made in the image of God and are therefore loved and sacred.

Fruitful faith is about glorifying God through creation, enjoying it, praising God for the new day. It's about fulfilling our first given role as caretakers of creation.

This isn't fruit that you squeeze out by your own human efforts, it's not another chore to add to your to-do-list. Rather, this faithful glorifying fruit is something that grows and happens naturally when you abide daily in God.

I'm working out what that looks like in my own everyday life, and I strongly encourage you to do the same, to God be the glory, amen.

Jamie Milliken
2nd May 2021