

## Sermon 29 April 2018

### John 15:1-8

I love the image of the vine that Jesus uses here. I guess it has something to do with my rural background. And as the society of the time was very much a rural society, it was therefore an image which Jesus's listeners could relate to. It was an image which was, not only part of their present life, but also part of their history. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. *Isaiah 5*: 'Now I will sing a song for the one I love about his vineyard. My beloved has a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill.' *Jeremiah 2:21* 'How could this happen? When I planted you, I chose a vine of the purest stock – the very best. How did you grow into this corrupt wild vine?' *Ezekiel 15* likens Israel to a vine, as does *Ezekiel 19:10* 'Your mother was like a vine'. *Psalms 80:8* 'You brought us out of Egypt as though we were a tender vine.' The examples go on and on.

Vines grew all over Palestine, and in fact the vine had become the symbol of the nation of Israel. So Jesus, as he was wont to do, taps into something with which the people are very familiar. In this case, he likens himself to a vine, and not just any vine, but a true vine. What does he mean by this? For a guide we could do worse than turn back to the previous chapter, John 14, where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." What does 'truth' mean? The real thing? So Jesus is saying, 'I am the real thing. Stick with me and you are on the straight and narrow.'

So where does the pruning come in? I am sure we are all reasonably familiar with the practice and benefits of pruning. Essentially, pruning takes place at the end of the growing season in order to prepare the tree or plant for the next growing season. In order for maximum fruit to be produced those branches which are not going to be productive are cut off so that the good branches produce as much fruit as possible.

So who was Jesus thinking of when he referred to those branches which needed pruning, the non-productive branches? Firstly, those Jews who had not accepted him for who he was. They were, after all, branches of God's vine. This was a picture that prophet after prophet had drawn. But they refused to listen to him, to accept him, so they are the useless branches.

Secondly, his reference encompasses something far more general, something which relates very much to us today. This was a feature of the stories of Jesus. On the one hand they were pertinent to a situation as it was then. On the other hand, they are pertinent to us today. In this case, he is referring to those Christians who listen to his word, who profess to be Christians, but in practice they fall very short. In other words, they are useless branches, all leaf and no fruit!

Now we all have our failings and our moments of weakness, but there is little doubt that being a Christian does call for a degree of discipline. There is the story of an old guy in the backwoods of Kentucky who could be counted upon to show up at revival meetings whenever an evangelist came to town. At the end of each service when the invitation was given, he would come down the aisle, get down on his knees, raise his arms to heaven and cry out, 'Fill me, Jesus! Fill me! Fill me, Jesus!' Then, within a matter of a few days, he would slip back to his old ways. But when the next round of revival meetings was held, he would once again go to the meetings, walk down the aisle saying, 'Fill me, Jesus!'

On this particular occasion, he was down on his knees again yelling to the ceiling, 'Fill me, Jesus! Fill me, Jesus!' when from the back of the church a lady called out, 'Don't do it, Lord. He leaks!'

Of course, the truth is we all leak, but if we are to be productive branches of God's vine, if we are to produce fruit on his behalf, then we need to do everything in our powers to fulfill his commandments, through our actions and our words. That means to spread the love, through reaching out to the needy and through supporting and uplifting through what we say to one another.

In that vein, I want to finish by commenting on an issue that has been very much in the news lately. I refer to the comments by Israel Folau that all gay people will go to hell unless they repent. I have a problem with this statement on several fronts. I could go on about the fact that he is a role model, whether he likes it or not and that words like this can actually kill, but I want to mention two points

from a purely Christian perspective, or should I say, my perspective as a Christian.

Firstly, the God I believe in, the God as given to me by Jesus Christ, is a God who embraces everyone and demands me to practise unconditional love.

Secondly, who am I, or in this case, who is Israel Folau, to decide who is going to hell? Surely, that is God's job. Rather than play God, I believe we should be making sure our own lives are in order so that when the time comes we can be assured of a life basking in God's eternal love. For my part, I am far too much of a sinner to be pointing the finger at someone else. I am reminded very much of the occasion when Jesus confronted the men who were about to stone the woman accused of adultery (John 8:1-11). And remember these were religious leaders. What did he say to them, 'All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stone.' And what happened. They all walked away. In my very humble opinion, I believe Israel needs to drop his stone and walk away. I think there is a very important lesson for all of us in that story.

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