

Sermon 28 April 2024

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 an image which Jesus' 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 of the vineyard of God. Isaiah 5:1, *'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 it grow into this corrupt wild vine?'* Ezekiel 19:10 (referring to Israel), *'Your mother was like a vine.'* Psalm 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 a symbol of the nation of Israel. So Jesus, as he is 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?

Firstly, he is saying that he comes directly from God. *'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.'* The second point lies in the word, 'true' – *'I am the true vine.'* Jesus is saying that he is the real deal. In the Old Testament we see Israel referred to as a vine. Jesus is saying that he is the new Israel; he is the real and genuine Messiah. This is about new beginnings, and I will come back to that in a moment.

It is interesting that in the previous chapter of John, Jesus says, *'I am the way, the truth and the life.'* John 14:6. So Jesus is now re-emphasising this point. In Jesus we have the genuine article. He is saying, 'I am the real thing. Stick with me and you are on the straight and narrow. Stick with me, and I will lead you to a new relationship with God.'

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.

I refer back to the point I made about new beginnings. Out with the old and in with the new. In order for the new crop to be plentiful, we first have to purge the unproductive. Jesus is saying, 'Get rid of your old habits and beliefs. Come on board with me and I will show you a new understanding of God, a new relationship with God.'

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 whom 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. I have already mentioned new beginnings for us today in terms of a new relationship with God. But he is also 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 commitment and 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, Jesus!' Then within a matter of days he would slip back to his old ways. But when the round of revival meetings was held, he would once again turn up, walk down the aisle shouting, '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 power to fulfil his commandments, through our actions and our words. That means to spread the love, through reaching out to the needy, supporting and uplifting through what we do and say to one another.

That should be the mission of our church, and as members of our church, we each have a role to play, though that role will vary according to our gifts and personalities. As Paul says in our first reading, '*We are all part of Christ's body, and each one of us has different work to do.*' Romans 12:5. I don't think I need to elaborate as I have spoken about this on more than one occasion in the past few weeks. Our church is Jesus' vine; we are its branches.

I want to finish by referring to a hugely important commemoration that took place this past week – Anzac Day. Interestingly, there is a message in the Anzac story that is so very relevant to the message we have expounded over the past few weeks – the preparedness to make sacrifices on behalf of others. As we know, Anzac Day commemorates the courage and sacrifice made by our soldiers during the Gallipoli campaign and it is said that our national character had its genesis on the battlefields of Gallipoli. I believe that incorporated in the Kiwi character is that willingness to make sacrifices for others. Let me relate to you a well-known story.

During the First World War, a soldier in the trenches saw his friend out in no-man's land stumble and fall in a hail of bullets. He said to his officer, 'Sir, may I go and bring him in?' But the officer refused. 'No one can survive out there,' he said, 'I will only lose you as well.' Disobeying the order, the soldier went to try and save his friend. Somehow, he got his friend onto his shoulder and staggered back to the trenches, but on the way back he himself was hit quite badly by the enemy fire. To compound matters, his friend had died as he carried him back.

The officer was furious. 'I told you not to go,' he said. 'Your friend is dead and now you have been badly wounded. It was just not worth it.' The soldier replied, 'Oh but it was worth it, sir. You see, when I got to him, he said, "Jim, I knew you would come."'

This is a story of true sacrificial love. Embedded in the Kiwi character is the selfless care for the underdog. It is a character that found its expression on the battleground of Gallipoli. It is a character which is both relevant and very much needed in our world today.

Let me finish by repeating what I said two weeks ago, '*Love lies at the heart of any meaningful relationship; sacrifice lies at the heart of love.*'