

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'The gardener is coming with twine and shears. A bonfire is smouldering in the corner of the vineyard. Are you ready to be pruned and reconfigured? Are you ready to let go of your independence and become part of something bigger? "I am the real vine," Jesus said. "Stick with me."'

Hymn – Dear Lord and Father of mankind,

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God, in your mercy, you gave Jesus as a gift to the world. He became the vine that we might be the branches— extending your goodness out into our communities and world. By your spirit, you resource and nourish, making provision for the seeds of talent in each of us, to flourish and burst forth in harvests of love and kindness, mercy and compassion, justice and peace. Impacting our world for good and enhancing the lives of others.

We seek forgiveness today for the times when we break connection with the vine; when we seek to go it alone and forget to drink at the well of Jesus' Spirit.

We seek forgiveness today for not staying strong when we can do so. When the winds and storms of life make us strain under pressure, meaning we sometimes crack open or splinter in the face of trouble.

We seek forgiveness today for the lack of end product. Sometimes we beaver away at being busy, yet forget, or lose sight of, the fact that harvesting our endeavour into results that make a positive difference to others, is what you ask from us.

And forgive us when we become transfixed by our own worthiness, that we fail to acknowledge the good that other people and organisations bring to the communities in which we live and the world of which we are part.

Lord, like refreshing rain wash over us and bring renewal and new life. Take the ingredients that make us who we are, and make them into something full of life, energy and vigour. May your Spirit grant us forgiveness, and may she inspire us to new growth within and towards flourishing production to the glory of God.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Readings: John 15: 1 - 8

"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. ³ You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. ⁴ Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶ Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. ⁸ My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.

Hymn – In heavenly love abiding

Sermon – 'Tangled Abodes'

I wonder if you have ever seen the film, 'Edward Scissorhands'? It is a quirky, Tim Burton, movie about tolerance, beauty and love. In it, Johnny Depp plays a young man who has been the subject of a mad scientist's cruel attempts at progress, resulting in him literally having scissors for hands. Though he was quite shy and gentle, people thought he was a dangerous monster, as even a simple handshake could be deadly.

Nonetheless, when Edward's mad scientist father dies, and he is left alone in a huge mansion, an Avon saleswoman befriends him and takes him in, trying to overlook his differences. As gossip spreads around their suburban neighbourhood, everyone else treats Edward as an 'odddity'. However, things begin to change one day, when Edward begins to use his scissor hands to sculp beautiful hedges.

He turns ordinary bushes into dinosaurs, birds and people. His trimming is sheer madness, as each sculpture emerges after much clipping. Yet, like Michelangelo using

his paint brush, Edward uses his scissor hands to reveal the hidden beauty waiting inside the hedges and, in the process, Edward's own inner beauty is revealed, and the neighbour fears are trimmed back by his acts of loving kindness. There are times when I wish that I had the gardening skills of Edward Scissorhands. Having arrived in a manse in 2009, which had a big garden, from a second floor flat, with no garden, in Partick, Felicity and I spent weeks trying to get rid of some ivy. Ivy that had roots which could have been described as both deep and strong.

Therefore, as today's Gospel reading about vines and branches, appeared on the lectionary cycle, as it does every three years, I smiled ruefully at the thought of the ivy. Yet, there are many stories within the Bible that talk about seeds, gardens, plants and other elements of the natural world. So, even though the 2009 memory always comes to mind, I can also see the importance Jesus puts on such images in His teachings. In a crowd full of country folk, who earned their living from the land, what more vivid way to teach than through the things which are important to them.

Today, there are fewer and fewer sowers and vinedressers but the core message for us remains the same. In the process of planting, growing, blossoming, and harvesting are images of our life cycle, and of our faith journey, which Jesus asks us to continue to be attentive to, even in our changing world.

Jesus' teaching on the vine and the branches offers us many guidelines for living our lives, yet some of them are not so easy to follow. Jesus tells us that, *'he [God] prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit.'* We are comfortable with the imagery of bearing fruit. We know that there is good fruit and bad fruit, good seed and bad seed. We know that, sometimes, it is hard to tell whether we are wheat or weeds.

However, this is different. Jesus not only says that we must bear fruit, now He says even that fruit will be pruned to make it bear in more abundance. Vine branches often spring forth several shoots at once – a primary fruit, as well as secondary and tertiary fruits. All three of these fruits would mature into edible, healthy fruits, given the opportunity. However, the vine dresser usually prunes the second and third fruits. Why prune them if they would make good fruits? Well, to give stronger life to the primary fruit. With the food and nourishment all concentrated into one area, the remaining fruit gains the best of everything, and becomes, in turn, the best fruit.

Take a moment, to think of your own life. With our busy, quick-paced culture, with our information society, and vast resources, we can bear much fruit. Yet, often, at least in my own life, I find my energy is spent in a lot of small ways, scattered here and there, sometimes lacking focus and direction. Our fruits, in their variety, are good, but are they as good as they might be with a little pruning?

Imagine if you channelled the nourishment and sustenance God provides into one outlet, into one branch, to one fruit. What could you accomplish? What could you do for God? The secondary and tertiary branches in our lives are not usually bad things. Yet, they are not the places where our gifts and graces from God are best spent. Our energy, our passion, belongs in the primary branch, the path that Christ calls each of us travel. Sometimes, we need a little pruning, from the gentle hand of the vinedresser.

We all need this gentle pruning, but it is essential to remember that we are the branches and not the vinedresser. We do not do the pruning. Branches do not cut off other branches. So, the vinedresser prunes, but leaves many kinds of branches to bear the good fruit. Long branches and short ones, skinny and plump branches, curvy and straight branches. We, the branches, do not do the pruning, but live together, as many and varied extensions of the vine of Christ. The nourishment, the food that gives life to our primary branch, is Jesus.

On a vine, the branches do not prune each other, and they do not cling to the vine. The vine does not hold the branches. They do not twist around one another. Instead, the branches flow from the vine. They are a part of the vine, an extension, growing out of the vine. We must mimic these branches in our own relationship with Jesus. We cannot cling to the vine; we must let go. If we do not let go of the vine, how can we reach out to others? How can we do our work if our hands are busy holding on?

You see, to be branches, we must have faith and let go. Jesus promises us rest and comfort under God's care, but this does not 'exempt us' from our calling to work for God. If we have the nourishment of the Spirit flowing through Christ, the branches do not need to cling on anymore because we are already a part of the vineyard. Faith enables us, as disciples, to flow from the vine of Christ.

As branches, we still seek to be as 'Christ-like' as possible. Think of the vine for a moment. There is only one vine, at the very centre of the plant, from which all the branches spring out. However, there are several branches, after much growth and

change, that become so strong and sturdy, that they are almost indistinguishable from the vine itself. These branches support many smaller, newer branches, and though these branches are not themselves the vine, they transport the nourishment from the vine to the smaller branches.

Imagine, if we were like those strong branches. We seek to be followers of Jesus, and what greater way than to act in ways so 'Christ-like' that others see in us the person of Jesus Himself. If our actions and attitudes mimic those of Jesus, we, as branches, can become strong and sturdy, so that others can see Jesus in us. As stronger branches, we can support new branches, people who have just started to learn about Christ's love. We become channels for the nourishing food that helps the smaller branches to grow.

We lift one another up, support one another, and together, create better and more abundant fruit. Jesus speaks of this relationship between the vine and the branches in special terms. He says, in verse 4, *'Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you.'* In the First Letter of John, we find similar language. John writes: *'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.'*

The way that we become stronger branches, able to help and support others, is by allowing God to abide in us, as we abide in God and God's love. It is a reciprocal relationship, and we benefit from both sides. God dwells in us, and we are a part of God – we abide in Him. The past tense of abide is abode. An abode is a dwelling place – a home. God wants to make a home in our lives, and He offers us the chance to make a home in Him. A home is a resting place, a source of strength and encouragement. A place of relationships and connections, if struggle and heartache, a house of love. We are offered the chance to share all these things with God through Jesus if we simply invite God into our tangled abodes.

The vine and the branches are part of one another. The branches, without the vine, are dead. The vine, without the branches, is useless. Yet together, abiding in one another, they yield perfect love, perfect life and plentiful fruit. John's message for us is that the love of God is perfected in us. We have the opportunity, if we seize it, to be part of a perfect relationship of love. Perfect love. Will we invite God home, into our tangled abodes, and strive to become the branches, that we may abide in Christ's perfect love.

In the Name of the Loving Father, the Risen Son, and the Guiding Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – Lord Jesus Christ, (Living Lord)

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

God of the world we live in, the communities of which we are part, the good and the bad of human life, we approach you aware that there is much that you seek to bring to our attention and for which we must pray.

We think about the Church in our own lands and how different the landscape is today from a few years ago. We recognise that it is hard— yet we also see possibility and potential. You have entrusted us to navigate towards change. Not those who have come before us, not those to come, but you have called us to support the True Vine in the work of the Kingdom today. This is a privilege and blessing. It is not without its challenge, yet, you say to us that, as we stay connected to you we have what it takes to continue to spread your Kingdom's values across the world.

We pray for those congregations that are fearful, doubting their capacity to play a significant role in society today; for those journeying towards a new normal that might see a union of collaborative working; and especially for those who understand that for something that is right for today and tomorrow, the possibility of closure, in order to reform in a new way, is very real.

We give thanks for the infrastructure of Third Sector Organizations, charities and NGOs, creating a backbone in our nation and world, that means we are never without resource when it comes to the provision of support and care in our wider society. We recognise that sometimes politics gets in the way, political machinations prevent the freedoms and encouragement best suited to make the work of these organisations thrive. Sometimes we, the church, do not pray enough for the success of this work, choosing instead to concentrate attention on our own activities.

Lord, connect us together as capable people, churches, organisations, and industries, that we might continue to find a shared vision for our world and to bring a heavenly vision to harvest in our time. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn – Love Divine, all loves excelling

Benediction

As part of the living vine, let us go from here to bear fruit in the name of the true vine, Jesus Christ, our Lord. So, as we go, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit, rest upon you and all whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Closing Song – The Blessing (Australia)