

GOD'S FRUITFUL FRIENDS

John 15:1-17

This morning we celebrated harvest thanksgiving, remembering God's goodness in giving us what we need for our physical life, rejoicing in the beauty of the created world, thinking about how we can share God's gifts more equitably. This evening we read something Jesus said which is really a harvest metaphor. We read Jesus' instructions for living a fruitful life and being God's fruitful friends. As we unpack what he is saying, let me imagine a little story with you.

Once upon a time there was a grape vine growing in a field in Burgundy. It was only a little vine, but already it had several branches, which twisted and curled themselves along the supporting trellis and wires. The sun shone, the rain fell, and, week by week, the vine grew. As it grew, one of the branches found itself in a very comfortable position, resting along a solid piece of trellis-work, rather than dangling precariously from one of the wires. It felt that it had found its place in life. It had come home.

However the sun continued to shine and the rain continued to fall, and the vine continued to grow. Before too long the branch felt the vine trying to pull it away from its secure resting place on the wooden beam of the trellis. But it didn't want to leave its new-found home. So it resisted. It twined itself round and round the beam.

The vine continued to grow, but now, as it grew taller the branch pulled all the harder to stay where it was. It pulled so hard that in the end it pulled itself right out of the vine! At first it didn't notice. All it cared about was the life had suddenly become much easier. That stupid vine seemed to have decided to let it have its own way and stop bothering it to go where it didn't want to. Life was good. Later it began to realise that it was hungry and thirsty. Without the vine it had no food. It began to grow hard and stiff. Its leaves turned brown, and the little bunch of grapes that dangled from it shrivelled and became nothing. And so the branch finally died, secure and comfortable, but having achieved nothing but that fleeting comfort for itself. The vine-dresser came along, saw that the branch had died, removed it and had it burned and its ashes used for fertilizer.

Do we ever suffer from the same malady that afflicted that branch? Do we want to keep things the same once they have become comfortable for us? That is pretty normal, it's how the world behaves. Think about it for a minute. How hard the nations of the world struggle, perhaps rightly, perhaps not, to maintain the balance of power. How hard various privileged groups struggle to maintain a status quo that favours them. Think of the rulers of Burma/Myanmar, of the wall built by the Israelis, of the terrible suffering which has been inflicted on the people of Zimbabwe because of an old man who likes his power and privilege. Think how hard those of us in this country who are privileged work to convince ourselves that we are not privileged, that life really is fair for everyone. As in Looking-glass Country in Lewis Carroll's novel, we have to run as hard as we can to remain standing still, and we waste a lot of energy in doing so.

We try to keep ourselves comfortable in the church too. And we always have done. We're not so bad as we used to be here, but there are still those who think that they have their own special seats in the church building! We may not use the little windows designed to display the name or calling of the occupant, but there can still be a sense of

territory. Look how you are all sitting tonight in what we jokingly refer to as the Tommy Kelly aisle!

It can happen with roles in church as well: who does what. There was a time when I didn't see myself as being a minister. I was quite happy in the church where I was then, running the youth group and attending prayer meetings. That was my role as I saw it, and I liked it that way. I even subscribed to the view that women should not be ordained because then I could be sure God would never call me to preach. I wonder if there are people and positions in this church which have been allowed to go together for longer than God intended? Do we sometimes just assume that something is so-and-so's job (even our own) rather than look to see who God is pointing out for the task? Do we seek cosy neuks, rather than growing edges?

Or do we suffer from a desire to make our good news - the gospel - rigid? To say that we know what it means to be a Christian? The human desire for security is great, and God know it and has provided for it. But do we sometimes take that provision and try to improve upon it - to lay down laws for ourselves, when Christ said that he came to free us from the law? In our metaphor, Jesus says, "You have been cleansed by the word which I have spoken to you," cleansed, or, as it says in the footnote, pruned. Jesus' words prune us. As they take root in us they strip from us any attempt to convince ourselves that we know what we are doing, they take from us all the rigid rules that we might like to think embody following Jesus, and they challenge us to re-evaluate everything that we say or do. Pruning isn't always a pleasant experience. Often the part which is removed is strong, healthy growth, which just happens to be in the wrong place. Jesus' words may challenge us in the very areas where we feel most secure, if we dare listen and take them to heart.

But God has provided for our need for security. We re to remain - abide, stay, live, persist - in Christ. But only in Christ. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever," says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. True. But Christ will also move us on and make us grow. Who we are as a body changes continually. There is a dreadful tendency in some churches to lament the passing of older members while discounting the contribution of newer ones. I once witnessed an extreme example of this in Edgewater Presbyterian Church, Chicago. There the neighbourhood had changed from being rich and white to being poor and largely African, with some other ethnic groups mixed in. The church had followed suit, but those of the rich white group who were left - mainly elderly, would not allow the others who had come to worship with them any positions of church leadership, even though the younger people were the most active. "We don't know if we can depend on them" was the burden of the old staggers song. Well, no, they didn't know, because they had never given them a chance to show if they were trustworthy.

Christ has plans for all his people and will lead us on to new tasks, new ideas, new truths, and new people to love.

If we remain in Christ we will bear fruit. That, for Jesus, is a given. If we remain in him we will bear fruit, because remaining in him means living his life, letting his Spirit be the life-force in us. And what sort of fruit will we bear? The fruit that comes of loving each other. The first Christians were known for this. Those outside the church watched the way that they cared for each other, even for Christians who arrived

on a journey, unknown by any of the local group. “See how these Christians love one another!” was the cry of the outsiders.

There is a story told about John the elder, who is attributed with the authorship of the 4th Gospel. When he was an old man he spent much of his time in prayer. However he was always ready to listen and to give advice to those who sought him out. At that time, as ever, doctrinal questions were besetting the church. Over time people began to notice that whatever problem was brought to John, he had but the one answer: “Love one another.” When he was asked why this was, he replied, “Because it is enough.” It is enough. People outside cannot see what we believe about God and Jesus, but they can see how these beliefs are worked out in our love for one another. There is little that is more attractive to a love-hungry world.

And if we love one another and bear this kind of fruit, then we bring joy to Jesus. Imagine that - Jesus has let us be capable of giving him pleasure! And if we remain rooted in Christ and love one another then our own joy will be great. When you love someone, it doesn't matter how much you have to put yourself out to help them, it's still an occasion for mutual joy. It is only when a task is a duty that it seems onerous. Love on another, said Jesus. That means loving all those whom God has called, no matter how much we like them, how much we agree with them - or not. We are to love one another - to seek the welfare of the other person, to seek to understand who they are, not to force them to agree with and become like us. This in itself will keep us from becoming rigid in our faith and in our attempts to follow Christ.

As we remain rooted in Christ and grow with him, we will sometimes feel very comfortable with the places in which we find ourselves; but at other time we will feel very unsure of ourselves and vulnerable. May our prayer for each other be that we remain steadfast in Christ, living out his love and acceptance and bearing fruit to glorify God. Then God calls us his friends. The Christ rejoices in us and our own joy is great.