

Easter 4 B 2nd May 2021

Our Lord grew up in a society that was intimately familiar with agriculture. The images that he used to explain the ways of his Father in heaven were second nature to his audience. It seems to me that Jesus is suggesting in our Gospel today that the word of God is like a giant scythe for the people of God. Our Lord scatters the word with grace in his teaching and in his example. The word of God comes into us and as it takes hold it is designed to remove areas in our life that keep us from God while making room for God to dwell within us. The Word of God not only provides us with an opportunity for growth, it provides us with the possibility of greater and improved health.

No doubt, at times, the Church has been weeded and pruned- and I think such time is upon us again, precipitated by COVID\_19. The Diocese through the Archbishop and Bishops will be speaking to all the archdeaconries in Melbourne and Geelong and there will indeed be a weeding and pruning.

The Church at times has developed impossible theologies, like thinking we must be all things to all people or that aligning to contemporary issues of the age will make us “relevant” and that conditional non-habitual attendance is OK. When we do this, when we think this way, we often become almost nothing to anyone and fill the pews with people who will leave at the “drop of the hat” if we don’t match their expectations. When congregations seek to be all things to all people they are usually operating out of their own diverse opinions and ideas rather than making room for the Word of God to dwell within them. When congregations seek to be all things to all people, they can become so spiritually scattered, unfocused, diluted and inert, because of the fear of doing anything that may cause offence, that almost nothing of lasting worth can grow within them. When congregations are pruned by the Word of God, by which I mean when congregations listen and discover the guidance of the Holy Spirit congregations become fruitful and noticed and make a difference not only among the membership but in the larger community in which they are situated. Primarily this will be in all cases, a spiritual not numerical, awakening and/or epiphany.

I have noticed over the years amongst clergy an allied problem and the need for there to be pruning of some impossible thinking, particularly the impossible theology of the “personality cult” to match the impossible theology of being all things to all people- the crowd pleaser. There is a common expectation in many churches that it is the role of the priest to be more than anything else- those things. There are numerous christian congregations around us who reflect this chaotic impossible theologies which sees people wandering from one congregation to another a kind of church shopping with all the consumerist traits they bring with them and inevitably leave with them. Many a clergy breakdown or burnout and congregation dispute and/or decline occurs when these impossible theologies coalesce into the perfect storm of impossible expectation and spectacular failure to remember that God gives the growth, spiritual and physical.

These impossible theologies need pruning from time to time by first confessing the expectant thinking in them and then to adjust life in a way that allows God to be God, to listen and discover the guidance of the Holy Spirit and to simply serve one day at a time seeking his guidance for each day. By putting God first the needs that we need to attend to as the people of the Lord became more focussed and more grace filled and more possible.

I think that’s what God’s pruning does; as we open ourselves to being pruned by God we discover that as painful as the pruning may be at the moment of pruning, our lives do become richer, fuller, and more abundant.

We are invited to abide in God and we are reminded that our Lord abides in us. We may want to ask ourselves the question: In what or in whom do we abide? Our congregations may abide in these impossible theologies. The clergy may abide in these impossible theologies. These impossible theologies may be full of good intentions and expectations but they’re missing the point of the Lord’s primary call to abide in him. Our Lord calls individuals and congregations to abide in him and to discover his abiding presence in us first, above all else. The temptation to individuals is to abide in the prevailing culture of their time first, rather than in the Lord. In our generation the culture misleads us into believing “that bigger is better” we will be satisfied/appeased if we get a bigger house, a more glamorous lifestyle, a better job, more money, live life 24/7 or countless other things that promise instant gratification/ satisfaction but rarely if ever, live up to our expectations or produce lasting fruit.

We are promised much fruit in our lives as we abide in Jesus and receive his abiding presence already in us, given to us in baptism, refreshed in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul describes what our Lord’s fruit looks like in his letter to the Galatians. He points out that the fruit of a life lived in the Lord is a life that’s characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, generosity, and by other characteristics that reflect the presence of our Lord. In the same letter, Saint Paul also points out what happens when a life does not abide in the Lord. He points out the behaviours that occur

when a life abides in the wrong things. Those lives reflect the sins of jealousy, pride, dissatisfaction, cynicism and anger, quarrels and factions, drunkenness and envy, and things like that. Our Lord makes it very clear that a life that is not centred and grounded in the abiding presence of God Almighty is a misdirected life, a fruitless life, and an expectant unsatisfying miserable life doomed to failure.

If we are to look at ourselves as a field or a garden in which our Lord comes to dwell, and if we are to look at the fields and gardens that are a part of our experience, it's very easy to discover that there are good plants and there are weeds in our fields, in our gardens, and in our lives. The good plants and the weeds need to be dealt with. Our Lord desires to kill the weeds, just as he desires to remove the sins from our life. Our Lord desires to prune the good plants within our gardens, not because he wants to hurt us or cut us back or slow us down, but simply because he wants to make more room, more space for his good fruit to be produced within us, in our communities, and in our lives.

We are told that as we abide in our Lord we can ask for whatever we wish and it will be done for us. It seems to me the key statement in that phrase is abiding in the Lord. As we abide in our Lord and our Lord's word abides in us, as we spend time each day in our congregation and in our lives seeking our Lord's direction and purpose, we will discover God's glory and we will discover God's blessing in the fruitfulness of our lives, as we are given the privilege of serving those around us with his love, his joy, his patience, and his faithfulness. As we abide in the Lord and our Lord abides in us we will discover the deep pleasure of discipleship, for our Lord's disciples are not only his servants but we are his friends and companions.

Let us find pleasure in presenting our lives to our Lord and to those whom the Lord has given us to serve, and let us pray that our Lord will come and do the work of gardening that he needs to do within us and within our communities that he may be glorified, that the world may be served and that we may be blessed as he abides in us and we in him.

I shall leave you with verses 2,3 and 4 of that marvellous hymn by Henry Francis Lyte, Vicar of the fishing village Berry Head near Brixham in Devonshire, not far from where my father was born. Its coastal views are among the most beautiful on the British Isles. Henry laid out walking trails throughout the headland and wrote most of his sermons, hymns, and poetry while taking these walks:

*2. Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away.  
change and decay in all around I see:  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.*

*3. I need thy presence every passing hour;  
what but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?  
Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*

*4. I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless;  
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.  
Where is death's sting?  
Where, grave, thy victory?  
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.*

Fr Robert Newton