

Easter 4 B 28th April 2024

Our Lord grew up in a society that was intimately familiar with agriculture. The images that he used to explain the ways of God 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 secateurs for the people of God. The Word of God not only provides us with an opportunity for growth, it provides us with the possibility of pruning for greater and improved health.

If you read the *The Melbourne Anglican* you may be aware there are a number of parishes vacant at the moment. As an Archdeacon I have sat on Incumbency Committees in Ballarat and Melbourne many times. One committee from many years ago did not have a happy report to give me. They were not able to find a suitable priestly candidate for their church, though they found one promising prospect. Surnames are removed for confidentiality purposes- here was their list:

ADAM: Good man but has problems with his wife. Easily suggestible and one reference told us how he and his wife enjoyed walking nude in the woods.

EVE: Good woman but has problems with her husband. Likes snake wrangling and one reference told us how she and her husband enjoyed walking nude in the woods.

NOAH: Former priest of 120 years with no converts. Prone to unrealistic building projects.

SARAH: Strong lady but a bit old and has little kids in her nineties.

JOSEPH: A big thinker, but bit of a boaster; believes in dream interpreting and has a prison record.

MOSES: A modest and meek man, but poor communicator. Some say he left an earlier church over a murder charge.

DEBORAH: Great singer, but a bit ruthless.

SOLOMON: Great preacher, successful building projects, but a serious woman problem.

ELIJAH: Prone to depression; collapses under pressure.

JEREMIAH: Great insight, although a bit of a whinger.

HOSEA: A tender and loving priest, but our people could never handle his wife's occupation.

JONAH: Told us he was swallowed up by a great fish. He said the fish later spat him out on the shore near here. We hung up.

AMOS: Too much of a country hick. Backward and unpolished. With some extra theological training, he might have promise; but he has a hang-up against wealthy people.

PETER: Too blue collar. Has a bad temper, even said to have cursed. He is very impulsive and in denial.

MARY: Too compliant, questions about the legitimacy of her children.

PAUL: Powerful CEO type and fascinating preacher. However, he's short on tact and has been known to preach all night.

TIMOTHY: Too young.

DORCAS: Kind lady, but too fond of knitting circles.

JESUS: Has had popular times, but once when his church grew to 5000, He managed to offend them all; and his church dwindled down to twelve or so people. Seldom stays in one place very long. And, he is single.

JUDAS: His references are solid. A steady plodder. Good networker with connections. Knows how to raise money. Knows where the real power lies-reads the room really well. A mover and a shaker. We're inviting him to preach this Sunday in view of a position.

The Church at times has developed what I would call improbable or impossible theologies, like thinking we must be all things to all people or that aligning or conforming to the contemporary issues of the age will somehow draw in the crowd. These improbable or impossible theologies tend to usually operate out of our own diverse opinions and ideas rather than making room for the Word of God to dwell within them. These impossible or improbable theologies are characteristically spiritually scattered, unfocused, diluted and reactive which means that almost nothing of lasting worth can grow from them. William Inge Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London wrote in his *Diaries* in 1949 summing up the matter, with his characteristic wit. In answer to the argument that the Church must be up-to-date and go along with the times he answered, *'If the Church marries the spirit of this age, she will be a widow in the next.'*

When congregations are pruned by the Word of God, by which I mean when congregations listen and discover the guidance of the Holy Spirit they become fruitful and noticed and make a difference not only among themselves but in the larger community in which they are situated. This will be in all cases, a spiritual 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 or improbable thinking, particularly the theology of the "personality cult" to match the impossible or improbable theology of being "all things to all people"- the crowd pleaser. There is a common expectation and assumption 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 these chaotic improbable or impossible theologies which lead to permanent flux, precipitous rises and boasting followed sooner or later by dramatic falls. Many a clergy breakdown or burnout and congregation dispute and/or decline occurs when these improbable or impossible theologies coalesce into the perfect storm of colossal expectation and the spectacular failure to remember that God gives the growth, spiritual and physical- always.

These impossible and improbable theologies need pruning 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 importantly more probable and possible, richer, fuller and abundant.

Today in our Gospel we are invited to abide in God and we are reminded that our Lord abides in us. We may want to ask ourselves the biggest of questions: In what or in whom do we abide? Congregations may abide in these impossible or improbable theologies. The clergy may abide in these impossible or improbable theologies. These 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, above all else.

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 by contrast 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. 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 deep lasting pleasure of discipleship, for our Lord's disciples are not only his servants but we are his friends and companions.

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 the verses of that marvellous hymn that we sung on ANZAC DAY, and this

morning 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:

1. Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me

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.

5. Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies:
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Fr Robert Newton