

Easter 5B St Paul's – 02.05.21  
Delivered by Rev'd Julie Leaves

I know some preachers who are well versed in poetry (pun intended) and can usually come a beautifully apt poem to illustrate the theme of their sermon. While I have read a little poetry and have a couple I love, I can't claim to be an adept. I, on the other hand, can sometimes come up with some interesting choruses. The one that I feel has something to say in association with our Gospel goes by the name of "That's why I'm bananas for the Lord." Would you like me to sing it for you?

"He's a peach of a saviour. He's the apple of my eye. He gives us fruit in season and his love will never die.

He prunes down the branches when the branches grow to high and that's why I'm bananas for the Lord."

I'm sorry for my singing that but it does get the message across and it can be fun. Certainly the junior juniors used to enjoy it.

The passage we have as our Gospel is part of the longer discourse that Jesus has with his disciples at the Last Supper on the eve of his suffering and death. When he says "I am the true vine" it is the final of seven "I am" statements throughout John's Gospel. Jesus also states, I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the door of the sheepfold; the resurrection and the life; the good shepherd and the way, the truth, and the life. I AM is the name God gave to Moses from the burning bush as Moses was tasked with liberating the Hebrew people from slavery, oppression and death at the hands of the Egyptians. When Moses queried it he was told "I AM WHO I AM" Say to them I AM has sent me.

In calling himself the true vine Jesus gives his disciples a strong symbol, not just of his relation to the Father but also clearly shows them where they fit in, how their lives are inextricably bound with his. Of course, he also explores the possibility of how they (and we) would survive (or not survive) if they become detached from the main stem. There is the strident language of being pruned and cast aside and the impossibility of life continuing in such a state. However, while I understand the importance and strength of the allegory, I'm also very aware that sometimes that "detachment" from Jesus as the life source, the stem of the vine, isn't always something that is enacted upon us but rather it can be an unconscious drifting away or a conscious turning away. So often, when we feel far from God, far from the ground of our being, it's because of actions we have chosen to take or chosen not to take. I think we have to bear the brunt of the responsibility for the times when we realise how tenuous our link with the true vine, the light, the way, the shepherd has become. Our collect speaks of us fixing our hearts where true joys are to be found.

It's easy to forget this, to lose focus, direction, to become detached from the source of life itself but reconnecting is always possible.

In our first reading we see what it might be like to come to understand the call of God's spirit to each of us. Having invited Philip to explain the scriptures to him and receiving the truth with joy, the Ethiopian proclaims, "Here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptised?" A sudden blast of spiritual energy draws them to this profession of faith while, in the letter of John we hear, "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God...God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us..."

These are words that bring us back to ourselves and back to God. In this returning, this reconnecting, this placing ourselves back into God's hands, we are born anew. To return to our Gospel message, we are reminded that only by staying connected to the true vine will be able to bear fruit. After all, that is the point of a vine - to bear fruit and we are called to bear fruit. We read in Matthew (7:16) by their fruit you will know them. Separated from Christ we are unable to bear fruit. He is the source of our life and of every good thing we do. The pruning that we sometimes receive might be the trials and tribulation that we inevitably face as Christians but which hopefully, eventually will make us stronger and more determined to live in Christ. I always find it interesting that people think that, once you become a Christian, it'll be smooth sailing all the way. We only have to look at the life of our Saviour to realise this is unlikely to be the case. The timeless words of Mother Julian of Norwich encapsulate this perfectly. "Christ did not say thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be diseased, but he said, thou shalt not be overcome...all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."

Anyone who has tried to live as a follower of Jesus for more than five minutes, and I know that you have been following Jesus for way, way longer than that) knows struggle and heartache and times of wandering in the wilderness. The thing is that, when this happens, we need to reach out and we hope that we have those around us who will recognise our reaching out before we even realise what we're doing ourselves.

When we need to reconnect, it is love that will get us there. Call out to Christ, call out to those who follow him. Allow yourself to be caught up once more, to bear fruit once again. That great Australian prophet and cartoonist Michael Leunig puts it this way.

"Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and difficult as that."