

SERMON FOR THE 5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

REV JORDAN GREATBATCH

As some of you may know my youngest brother Liam is involved in the wine industry in the Hawkes Bay. I was privileged to get down to Hawkes Bay in early January. While I was there I visited many vineyards as well as the vineyard where my brother works. One of the things that I really enjoyed about visiting those various vineyards was not only the good wine, but learning about the process of tending the vines in order to produce great fruit.

One of the processes that I learnt was that in a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. Understandably, that is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. Therefore, the lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the trellis which upholds the vine. So they are pruned and kept short. They don't want too much sun or they may over ripen, but they equally don't want too much shade or fungus will take over. It is a delicate art, time consuming, yet when ones produces a great wine, highly rewarding. But it is also a process which often looks self-defeating. The aggressive

prune can make the vines look naked and vulnerable. It is this art which makes a good viticulturist.

And it is in fact not just vines that go through this process. As gardeners will know, certain flowers benefit from being 'deadheaded'. Meaning pinching the first flowers produced will result in fuller plants and more blossoms down the road. Yet how hard it is to do just that!

Those first flowers are so pretty that one wants to resist the advice to pinch them off. The laws of nature seem to contradict what we desire. Still there it is. Pruning results in more beautiful plants later. And it is this almost counter-intuitive process which Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. He tells his disciples that every branch that bears fruit he prunes in order to produce better fruit. Thus acknowledging the difficult and painful process that often accompanies discipleship.

And in turn we as Christians today know that life is not without its difficulties as many of you have experienced recently or in years past. And we know that when these times come we may feel like being isolated, or on our own because we do not know how to express how we feel to others out of fear that they will not understand. However, like the pruning of the branches we realise that what may seem to contradict our nature, is in fact what we need most.

And that is why Jesus does not just simply tell his followers to ‘hang in there’ or ‘she’ll be right’ as reassuring as those words may be to some. No, Jesus offers so much more than ‘hanging in there’, he invites us to be connected and grounded in him and his body.

For Jesus uses such strong imagery of abiding and connecting because he is trying to tell such a simple yet profound truth, that we cannot live the Christian life on our own.

This is a very challenging word for us today. The temptation to go it on our own is great. Just look at how many denominations that there are! We have a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself, and it has filtered its way into the church unfortunately. And though a valid goal, self-worth often comes equated with our own success and what we can produce, it becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges.

But our Lord challenges us to re-think such independence and to realise that we need each other, we need to be in community, we need to meet regularly, we need to be constantly connected to God through the sacraments we share in the life of the Church.

There is in fact a wonderful African proverb that sums these feelings up well, ‘Because we are, I am.’ ‘Because we are, I

am’. What a profound but simple truth. A truth that we have to constantly remind ourselves of every time we gather for worship, that our very presence here is not just for ourselves, but in fact the whole community, this is very hard truth for us to realise. But as a priest it is a misconception that I so often see.

We think that we are not noticed or that our presence does not matter on a Sunday morning. But I tell you it does! It is not a numbers game, it never should be, but we have to realise that when this church is full of people it adds a whole different dimension to the atmosphere and experience of God. If we just draw our memories back to a few weeks ago on Easter Sunday, the church was packed, the atmosphere joyous and the singing, majestic. This is it draws others to want to be a part of what we share. And so the image of Jesus as the true vine, and the Father as the vine-grower is not just about our relationship with God on an individual level, but our relationship to God as a community that gathers to receive God’s Holy Sacraments.

Therefore Jesus takes the common everyday language of the vine and transforms it into a symbol of community, mission, and love. His is not imagery of short term gratification, but like the crafting of a fine wine, is about the long haul process of building community.

And so I encourage us to be connected to the vine and each other in every area of our life, our giving, or fellowship, by our

very presence. There is a wonderful song based on this passage called “I am the Vine” by John Bell and Graham Maule that sums this message up so well and therefore I will leave you with their words.

For on your own, what can you dare?
Left to yourself no sap you share:
Branches that serve their own desire
Find themselves broken as fuel for fire

I am the Vine and you the branches
Pruned and prepared for all to see:
Chosen to bear the fruit of heaven
If you remain and trust in me

Amen