

Abiding – John 15.1-8

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The Tournament of Roses is a famous parade connected with New Year celebrations in Pasadena, California - a stream of colourful, flower-covered floats sponsored by different groups and companies. For over a century, visitors have experienced its beauty. Some years ago, the Standard Oil Company, now known as Chevron, had a particularly stunning float in the procession. All was going well, until, in the midst of proceedings, this float came to a grinding halt, and with it, the rest of the parade. As it turned out, its crew had attended to every detail except the fuel. Ironically, they had neglected to avail themselves of the company's most plentiful resource - gasoline.

We can see the humour in this, but it also serves as a warning. Our reading has touched on a similar theme – our need to be and stay connected with the energetic source of our life, the importance of abiding in Christ. If we neglect our connection with the one who sustains us, we too will falter – at some level, come to a grinding halt.

This passage comes in the middle of a five-chapter section of John's gospel known as the Upper Room Discourse (chs 13-17). Jesus, knowing that his time on earth was drawing to a close, gathered the disciples to give them his final teaching. He warns of trials to come, of challenges and tasks that will make great demands on them, and encourages them to stay the course, strong in faith, by staying connected with him. To illustrate this, he uses an image from their everyday situation - a picture of the vine and the vinedresser.

On the surface, the message is obvious, but there are some details that can cause perplexity, especially if we don't have such an intimate knowledge of the practice of tending vines and grapes.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser', Jesus says, explaining the symbolism in the very first verse. Jewish readers will pick up immediately that, Jesus is contrasting himself with the people of Israel who were also likened to a vine (cf. Ps 80.8; Isa .1-7; Jer 2.21) but who had been criticised for not bearing fruit. Jesus, as true vine embodies all they are called to be. In verse 2, Jesus elucidates the picture by describing two kinds of branches – those that do not bear fruit, and those that do; and two associated actions on God's part. *'Every branch in me that bears no fruit, he removes'*, it says in our versions, *'and every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, in order that it might bear more fruit'*. Now, this can all sound a bit punishing. If you don't produce and perform, you're cut out and cast away. But the Greek word translated 'remove' here is *aerei*, which can mean either 'lifts up' or 'takes away'. These two meanings are quite different, so how do we discern what Jesus meant?

According to vinedressers, grapevines, left unattended, grow along ground. If left like this, they will send little roots into the soil rather than produce any significant fruit. When a vinedresser sees branches like this, s/he lifts the branch off the ground and supports it with a line or trellis. This way, the branch has no choice but to draw its sustenance from the main vine. The end result is a sweet cluster of grapes.

If we gather Jesus' meaning from this practice, then *aerei* means not *removing* the unproductive branch but rather *lifting it up* so that it becomes fruitful. Far from being a callous and punishing act, as English translations can make it sound, this action is a careful nurturing of future fruitfulness. And, in a similar way, our divine vinedresser, doesn't remove us when we are unfruitful; rather, God tends us, lifts us up so we can draw deeply on the

sustenance of the vine and produce a future crop. (e.g., Sarah in the veggie patch ...)

But what about the branches that *are* producing? In verse 2, Jesus says these are *kathaerei*, (clearly a play on *aerei*), which means both ‘pruned’ and ‘cleaned’. Again, the sense here is not so much of wholesale excision as of tending the branches – removing extra suckers, cutting out dead and woody bits, in order that they remain vigorous and fruitful.

All this, you’ll note, is the vinedressers’ initiative; in Jesus’ analogy, it’s the Father’s work, for God the vinedresser desires that we be fruitful. But what about our part? How do we cooperate in this activity of fruit bearing – which I take to be, bearing love to the world through a life of joy, integrity, compassion and justice? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes this fruit as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

In this passage, our part (our call) is summed up in one word – abide. Jesus says, ‘*abide in me as I abide in you*’ (4). He goes on, ‘*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*’ Our part in this is to enter into the dynamic of abiding. It’s a very relational term – our life, our strength to bear and serve the world, our purpose, our power, our capacity to forgive and reconcile – it is all found in and drawn from Christ. In our own strength, we ultimately fall short, mess up, shrivel up, burn out; get tossed to and fro by life’s circumstances. It is Christ’s life and love that sustains us in the world – we must abide in him.

But how in practical terms does this happen? How do we abide, dwell, remain in him – maintain a life-giving connection? Traditionally, commentators suggest practices like bible reading, worship, Christian fellowship, sharing in holy communion, and pre-eminently, prayer. Of course,

all of these things can be engaged in a way that just goes through the motions. But when engaged whole heartedly, with an open mind and a responsive spirit these practices keep us connected and are deeply nourishing.

I often mention contemplation or meditation, and at the core that's what meditation is – a daily practice of *abiding*. In silence and stillness, we intentionally let go of all thought and busyness, all anxiety, striving and demand; in poverty of spirit, in simplicity and trust, we dwell in Christ (and he in us), like the branches of the vine.

Last week, I read a story about Isobel Marchment who recently turned 100. According to the World Community for Christian Meditation, Isobel is the oldest meditation group leader in the world and she lives in Mittagong, just up the road. She's been meditating for over 30 years, but that doesn't mean she's a superhero, somehow different to us. 'I'm a plodder', she says. 'Often I feel inadequate ... I still get distracted after all these years.' Nonetheless, the practice has been and remains vital. In fact, she says, 'meditation is the only real thing in my life now. I wouldn't be without it for anything ... I look forward to the morning and evening times of meditation and whenever I sit down, I feel I've somehow turned off the busy world temporarily and there is silence and peace'. This is abiding.

'What has the practice of meditation meant to me?', Isobel asks. 'More than I can put into words. To live the 'here and now' and not the 'there and then', to live in the present moment. And even if the road does seem to wind uphill most of the way now and you never know what's round the next corner ... I don't fear what the future may bring – I simply go on praying ... that in the end I may become the person God breathed me into existence to be – the unique bit of the jigsaw fitting into the whole picture'. 'So I press on,

accepting gladly the gift of my life', daily seeking to 'let go and let God'. She finished up by quoting words of John Main, that have helped her all these years: 'Breathe in the love of God. Breathe out your life into God's hands. Live in that love'.

'I am the vine, you are the branches', Jesus says. 'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit'. Amen.