

A Holy Lent

John 15:1-9

There are certain readings and liturgical words which are associated with particular Church seasons which, for me at any rate, seem somehow to resonate with possibility and promise. Hearing them spoken out as part of our worship seems to open a doorway through which it's possible to glimpse a deeper reality than that of our usual daily experience. The Prologue to John's gospel – "In the beginning was the Word" – is one such, as are the opening words of John 20, "Early on the Sunday morning, while it was still dark..."

Somewhat surprisingly, over the past couple of years, a third passage in this category has emerged for me, not from Scripture, but the opening words from the liturgy for Ash Wednesday. They remind us that Christians have traditionally viewed Lent as a time of preparation for Holy Week and Easter, a time of growth in personal faith and devotion, and conclude with the minister saying this:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

And we reply

***Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy upon us.***

This year we are, quite rightly, using our Sunday morning worship to apply these words to our life as the Church, the gathered people of God, especially as we emerge into the post-pandemic world. So this evening, I thought perhaps we would spend a little time reflecting on our personal spiritual lives. A previous church I was part of habitually referred to Lent as a time for a "spiritual MOT", when we book ourselves in and systematically re-examine ourselves to check we're in good working spiritual order – an image which, or may not, appeal to you!

So we're going to listen to another passage from John's gospel, from Jesus' final conversation with his disciples before they set out for the garden of Gethsemane. Part of Jesus "last words" – something he clearly wanted them to remember, take to heart, and put into practice...

John 15:1-9

Pruning, and abiding

So let's get one thing clear. I am not a gardener. And I know that many, if not most, of you are. So I'm certainly not going to start trying to tell anyone how to prune anything. But I

hope we all agree that when it comes to gardens, pruning is an essential part of keeping things healthy.

It cuts out disease, which could spread until the plant becomes too weak to survive.

It cuts away dead and tangled and overlapping growth, so that the sunshine can reach the leaves. One writer described it as “letting the light right into the heart of the plant.”

It helps to encourage new growth, in the best place, so that the plant can produce flowers and, in due course, fruit.

So, as gardeners, we recognise that pruning is good. Yet as followers of Jesus, I doubt if many of us relish the approach of the pruning knife. It’s something we shy away from. We fear the pain of the incision, the exposure of the soft inner “spiritual tissue.”

Maybe it would help to see two different ways in which we are pruned.

The first is perhaps closer to the pruning which Jesus is describing in this passage. It’s the pruning over which we have no control, which comes from outside. The paring back and cutting away which comes from the dark times in our lives. Now let me say immediately, that I absolutely do not believe that God sends us bad times to test us or to “put us right”. But I do recognise that within the creation as it currently is, bad things do happen. And I do believe that God can and does work in them and through them to bring new life and hope. Good Friday and Easter are about death and resurrection after all.

And sometimes old things, old habits, old ways of seeing and understanding God, do have to “die” so that we can see or experience a bigger picture of who God is, and of God’s love for us. After all, Jesus commends child-*like* reliance on the Father, rather than child-*ish* simple-mindedness.

Maybe you have experienced this type of pruning. Maybe you are experiencing it right now. It is hard and painful. And yet it may help to remember that the gardener is rarely closer to the plant than when she or he is pruning the branch. No matter how far away God may seem, he is there, shaping a new future.

The second type of pruning is perhaps more palatable as we are in control. It’s the pruning which comes from identifying for ourselves where unhealthy habits could be spreading out of control, where dead wood and extraneous growth is getting in the way of the light of God reaching our hearts, where the lifeblood of God’s Spirit is being impeded, so flowers and fruit are not growing.

Now, if these were “normal” times, I’d have a pile of sticks and some labels, and invite you to write on the label something that you know you need to prune in your own life, and then fasten it to the stick. And we’d put the sticks into a bin and take them outside and either throw them on the compost heap or even burn them. And everyone would have a flower or a small bunch of grapes in exchange. Sadly, we can’t do that, but can I invite you to stop the video, or stop reading, and take some time just to ponder over those things. And maybe to

take some action which you can take in your circumstances, as a sign that you are pruning that action or attitude out of your life so that the life of God can flow more freely in you, or your heart can be more open to God's light, or so that you can live in a more spiritually healthy way. [If you're listening on the phone, can I suggest that you do this at the end of the call.]

[Pause]

So, we've thought about pruning. Now, much more briefly, let's turn to the part of that reading from John's gospel where Jesus speaks of abiding in the vine. "Abiding" isn't a word we use much in everyday conversation – I guess the closest translation would be to say "living constantly". It's a beautiful picture. In a vine there is no clear distinction between the vine and the branch – it is one seamless plant, fed by the sap which flows throughout it. It speaks of the closeness of God and his people, with the Holy Spirit flowing freely into us. "Indwelling" as the Bible puts it. "God within us."

And there is, too, an element of just receiving the Spirit. Of allowing the Spirit to flow through us. Of being still and open before God, in whatever way is meaningful for us, and receiving his love, life and power, so that we can "bear fruit", showing God's love, peace, justice and mercy in the world. "Abide in me," says Jesus, "because apart from me, you can do nothing."

So once again, let's pause briefly. You will know how you best open yourself up to meet with God. Light a candle. Open the window and listen to the sounds of creation. Make something. Close your eyes, become aware of your breathing. Breathe out the stresses of life; breathe in the love and peace of God. Whatever works for you – do it now.

And just – abide.

[Pause]

"I am the vine", says Jesus. "You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because part from me, you can do nothing."

Pruning gives us space to abide.

And abiding allows us to be fruitful.

And being fruitful glorifies God.

And glorifying God is why we are here.