

Flourishing

17th November 2019
St John's and Christ the King

Malachi 4:1-2a
2 Thess 3:6-13
John 15:1-11

So – it's the season of the big TV competitions.

Bake Off crowned its latest champion at the end of last month (David Atherton), and Strictly (series 17!!) is well under way with its usual mix of glamour and sweat, heartbreak and triumph.

And if that's not enough for you, in the sporting arena we've had the drama of the Cricket World Cup (well done, England) and the Rugby World Cup (hard luck, England); and the prospect of Euro 2020 and the Olympics next year.

So much competition! So much pressure to be "the best", as opposed to "the rest".

Even our politics seems to be framed more around the act of "winning" than of actually governing the country wisely and well.

And I guess most of us have either lived our lives under pressure to "succeed", to "win", to "be the best"

Or bearing the burden of the message that always runs unacknowledged alongside this "well, we all know that x will never amount to much", and the sense of disempowerment, of worthlessness that accompanies it.

So, I think it's really important that today we are taking some time to look at what Jesus has to say about this, and to move away from the ideas of success and failure, and towards the idea of flourishing.

Look up flourishing in the dictionary, and you will find lots of lovely words to do with flowers and plants and gardens

To grow

To thrive

To flower

To blossom

To bear fruit
And my favourite - To be in full bloom

Images of growth and development and life and fertility and fullness.

Which brings us to our lovely Gospel reading for this morning – the image of the growing, climbing, spreading vine,
of Jesus as the root and stem,
and of us as branches growing out of it – nourished and fed by the sap that flows from him.
The sap of God's love.

There is no sense in here of competition, of some branches being winners and some losers – all the branches that remain connected to Jesus will “bear fruit”.
Some of that fruit will be about what we do
And some will be about who we are – our characters, attitudes and guiding principles.

So let's add a further definition to our list for flourishing
“becoming the best *me* that I can be, by being connected with God”

And let's explore this idea a bit more
“Becoming the best me that I can be” – this takes out all the comparison with others and focusses us on what we can do, rather than on what we can't – and then developing and growing so we can do that to the absolute best of our ability.

If you've seen the John Lewis Christmas ad on the telly, you might recognise some resonances

Edgar the dragon wants to be able to do lots of things that the other children do in the snowy town, but his fiery breath means that everything from snowball fights to iceskating ends in disaster. When finally he manages to burn down the town Christmas tree, he gives up and retreats into his house.

But his friend Ava (don't ask me how we know this is her name) has an idea, and when all the nobles gather for their Christmas dinner, she brings in Edgar, who gathers himself together and when the pudding is placed before him, ignites it (and only it) with a single exhalation.

In a sense, he stops trying to be like the others and focusses on being himself to the best of his ability. He takes what he can do, learns how to do it well - and becomes the best Christmas-pudding-igniting dragon he can be.

And it's really important to remember that this process of flourishing can, and should, happen at all stages of our life. It's easy to think of learning and growth as something that only happens in our earlier years, but we change with the passage of time, and so do our circumstances. When I was 27, I could chase around after children all day. Now, after Messy Church yesterday and having two of the grandchildren for a sleepover last night – I can tell you it's close to a miracle that I'm even vertical this morning! I have different things to offer to the children now from those I had 30+ years ago. We can continue to learn and develop and flourish throughout our whole lives.

So - "becoming the best *me* that I can be, by being connected with God"

"by being connected with God" means that the focus moves away from trying to do things by force of will, to allowing God to change us, so the growth happens naturally. Perhaps that's what Jesus is talking about when he mentions pruning. When we spend more time with God – praying, reading, meeting with other Christians and talking about him - he changes our hearts and minds to be more like him. And this is what our Start and Moving On courses aim to help us to have a chance to do. (Especially talking about God in a safe environment.)

And as we have seen, the aim of this

"becoming the best *me* that I can be, by being connected with God"

Is not so that we can feel good about ourselves, or become some sort of spiritual champions rather than producers of impossible bakery items, but so that we can bear fruit.

"My Father is glorified (the glory goes to God) by this – that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

"Fruit that will last" as Jesus goes on to say later in the passage

So let's think about what that fruit might look like, when we allow God to grow us, to help us to flourish.

And there are innumerable examples.

We might feel that we cannot stand up in front of loads of people and persuade them to come to church

But we could decide "I can invite my friend to come to the Christmas Tree festival with me."

And then invite her to a Carol Service and give her a lift to make it easier for her.

And then ask if she'd like to come with you to the next Coffee morning/Ploughmans or Tuesday Café.

It was by a similar route that one of our Confirmation candidates started coming to Church. And can I say that since she has been confirmed, I don't think she has stopped smiling!

But the example I'd like to explore more, is one I know is very important to lots of you, because you have said so and it goes something like this:

"It's such a shame my grandchildren, great-grandchildren, other young people I know and love, don't share my faith"

How could

"becoming the best *me* that I can be, by being connected with God"

...with God's help, growing and developing who we are,

...help with this?

I appreciate that not everyone has grandchildren, but with your permission I'm going to use that term for all young people (<30 years) who we know and love.

The newspapers are full of dreadful reports of how difficult it is to be a young person nowadays.

And IMHO, it can't help when culture insists "This is what "success" looks like" and reinforces it with "You can be whatever you want to be"

And I believe passionately that in order to provide the counterpoint / balance to that, all our children and young people need to hear about the God who loves them come what may,

They need to hear that in God's eyes, they are the best anyway

That he made them to be themselves, not someone else

That they don't need to be rich and/or famous to be "someone" – they already are.

being the best self they can be

This is the most precious gift we can ever give them

And it seems daunting – but I believe it is the type of "fruit that will last" that Jesus was talking about in that passage this morning.

But how?

Ideas

- The first thing we can all do – and the most important, is to pray for them. Stick a post-it note (or just a dot) on your bedroom mirror and pray for them each morning

whilst you're combing your hair. Or on the tea caddy so you pray for them each time you make a cuppa.

- Pray with them. Say grace. Bedtime prayers.
- If their parents are anti – suggest it as a way of their child making up their own mind, in the same way that they have been allowed to.
- Books and presents – examples of books, Real Christmas Advent Calendars, Real Easter eggs
- Talk to them about your faith “As a Christian, I think...” (Easier if you practice!)
- If they are local, bring them to things. Messy Church, Family Carols, crib service. Bring their friends too maybe? If they are older, ask them if they would like to come and help (often good for CV)
- We've heard of a church in the diocese that makes “pizza boxes” of activity suggestions to give to older children. If you're interested, we could explore that

What else might we do?

What are your ideas?

How can we flourish (become the best me I can be, by being connected with God), and in the process, help our children and young people to flourish too?

So to finish, a word of encouragement

When we went to Lyle and Steve's confirmation earlier this month, we were given a little booklet of short paragraphs written by some of the candidates telling the story of how they had come to be confirmed.

And for several of the young people there, the key person in their story was their Nan, Granny or Grandma. Who had faithfully lived out and shown them what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.

So be encouraged

God loves you just as you are, and too much to leave you like that

He wants, longs for, us to grow, to flourish

To “become the best *me* that I can be, by being connected with him”

He longs to help us to help the children and young people who he loves even more than we do

May we “abide in God” so that his joy may be in us, and so that our joy may be complete.