**The Vine and the Branches**

**(I hear the Mulga drinking!)**

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

OK, dear friends, are any of us branches to be picked up, thrown into the fire and burned? No? After all, we are bible-based, Christ-like and loving, aren’t we? For these are the values we identified last month in our conversation about mission; they are at the core of being the church here in Eden. Isn’t that right?

So Jesus must be referring to someone else! The ubiquitous they must be the dead branches, those who do not produce the fruits of the Spirit. And for them, according to this understanding, the consequence of being a branch that is not fruitful is clearly spelt out – you’re to be thrown away and burnt. So watch out! Be afraid of punishment!

This, for me, is a hard interpretation as it links the love, righteousness and goodness of God with pain, abandonment and punishment. I struggle to understand it and come to terms with it, not just because of how it challenges my faith and theology, but also because of the impact I think this interpretation has had on society in general.

It implicitly encourages self-righteousness, and gives rise to judgemental attitudes: “*We are better than them, as we occupy the moral high ground!*”. And it can endorse fear as an acceptable motivator of behaviour: people who fail our moral code will be condemned by God: so behave or suffer the consequences!

Such judgemental attitudes are rife in society today, with fear and self-righteousness being powerful motivating agents. We see this regularly, such as in:

* the recent US Presidential election;
* the vile, judgemental uses of social media;
* the acrimonious, polarising climate change debate;
* the debate surrounding Christian Porter and Brittany Higgins;
* the debate surrounding same-sex marriage and homosexuality;
* the blame game surrounding the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine;
* Harry and Meaghan’s condemnation by innuendo of the Royal Family;
* The whole debate in Australia surrounding the incarceration of refugees;
* Scott Morrison’s cowardly bullying in Parliament of the CEO of Australia Post; and
* Christian sects who excommunicate members they consider are not theologically correct.

Our DNA seems to take us down the path of being so judgemental, invoking fear and engaging in the blame game: “*It’s their fault, not ours*”! And I keep on asking myself: “*Why do we do this?*”. Is this biblically-based, Christ-like or loving? Didn’t Jesus condemn self-righteousness (especially amongst the Pharisees) and judging others?

Now I’m not taking sides on any of the above issues, as I imagine there are differences in this congregation on some of them. But what I want to highlight is how we have generally become so judgemental and fearful as a society today, and that there is a sustainable argument that this has its foundations in some interpretations of biblical passages like this one. And the question I ask myself is whether our Christian witness in this fear-filled judgemental wasteland should be that of loving neighbours, rather than moral crusaders.

It’s so easy to blame others, isn’t it? To claim the moral high ground for ourselves, and to trade on people’s fear, particularly when we use verses from the Bible as our moral authority. But then I’m reminded of the Sermon on the Mount – “*do not judge, or you too will be judged”* and *“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.*” I’ve read, too, that the phrase “*Do not be afraid*” is the most common phrase in the Bible.

So where does this leave us? Should our message be one of judgement and those who fall short of God’s standards being eternally damned? Is then our focus on God’s righteousness? Or is it about being compassionate advocates and evangelists of the good news of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness, honest witnesses in speaking out about sin and warning about God’s wrath and judgement? Is our focus then on fear? Or should we accept that there is mystery here, that we can never fully understand the paradox of a loving, forgiving God who both judges sinners and experiences utter abandonment? This sets our focus on God’s love.

A verse in the Bible that I love is 1 Cor 12:31 “*And yet I will show you the most excellent way.*” Paul has just been talking about spiritual gifts, and unity and diversity in the church and this phrase is the segue to his wonderful ode to love. It’s not about fear or judgement, but about the centrality of love in our Christian journey. Reinforcing this is today’s second reading, from 1 John 4. Listen, particularly, to what the author says about love, fear, judgement and punishment:

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgement: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

In other words our focus should be on love not fear, on forgiveness not punishment. Yes, we all fall short of God’s moral standards, and we do not love perfectly, but in judging us this loving God also forgives us. I remind you of the excellent message Michael gave two weeks ago on sin, that we are all sinners, and need to address the sin in our lives. And I think John 15 gives us further insights into this, into forgiving love in action, through the symbolism of pruning dead branches

When preparing this message I reflected on an understanding of pruning being forgiveness, love in action, not punishment. Bill Loader, a great Uniting Church New Testament scholar, sets the context for this as follows:

*The image of the vine is a rich source for spiritual reflection. It invites us to sense the divine as beneath us, rising up, rather than above us condescending. The top-down model has its attractiveness, but is often associated with notions of power which can confuse or abuse.*

I really like the symbolism of the divine rising up from below, filling my entire being and providing life-giving food to enable me to bear fruit. There is a connectedness here that is absolutely central to my very existence. As 1 John 4 says: “*he is in us*”.

It reminds me of a poem I wrote 15 years ago, a reflection on when I put my ear against the trunk of a Mulga tree in the desolate, dry centre of Australia and heard water coursing through it via capillary action. It’s called “*I heard the Mulga drinking!*”:

*I heard the Mulga drinking*

*life-giving water, drawn*

*from deep within the earth*

*in which it spreads its roots.*

*It was as if I was hearing*

*sighs of contentment,*

*a tree thirsty for life,*

*acknowledging its dependence*

*on the grace of Land.*

*In this Great Southland of the Holy Spirit*

*I heard the Mulga drinking!*

The symbolism for me is deep. In my life, when in times past I have been in a dry, desolate place, my soul has thirstily sucked in the love of God. It coursed through my whole body, renewing my life, giving me hope.

So now imagine you are a plant, like the vine. Perhaps an apple tree. Each year the gardener prunes you. This is not to punish you, but to make you more fruitful next year. You have branches that are too long, too straggly, blocking the light to other branches, or just not fruitful. Getting rid of the unproductive branches makes you stronger, more fruitful. Pruning is a part of the whole cycle of nature, as is burning dead branches to make ash, provide warmth and cook food. The cycle of life.

Similarly, getting rid of the branches of sin in my life through God’s forgiveness, God’s pruning, makes me stronger, more fruitful. Burning these branches turns that sin to ashes. The ashes of repentance are a part of the cycle of love.

This leads me to characterise forgiveness as being an essential component of advancing the prayer Jesus taught us “*Your Kingdom come on earth*”. In 1 John 4 the emphasis is not on judgement leading to punishment, but rather on judgement leading to forgiveness that takes away our guilt, and so facilitates fullness of life.

In God we have a loving gardener, not a punishing gardener. So what might God prune from our lives? Janice showed me this little cartoon about “throwing away” that I think is very relevant. It reads

“What are you throwing away?”

“Oh, just some old ideas and beliefs that were taking up too much space, such as ‘holiness’, ‘failure’, ‘over-emotional’, ‘not good enough’.”

What aspects of the way we live do we need pruned, thrown away?

* Blaming others
* Moral superiority
* Hatred

…. You name some (open up to congregation) …

* Fear

Loader says that a fear-based life, including a fear-based spirituality, needs liberation, and that in verses 17 and 18 the author uses a word that means “perfected, fulfilled, completed, matured”. It is about human well-being. And it is God’s initiative that has set in motion this liberating process that enables love to happen and to drive out fear.

Earlier in this service we heard a excerpy from another lectionary reading for today, Psalm 22. This Psalm was also in the Lectionary for the second Sunday in Lent leading up to Easter, as it starts with the cry of Jesus on the Cross:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

It is the cry of someone in pain, who feels utterly abandoned, and yet finishes in praise. This gives me hope for living. We all have experienced pain, life events that we cannot understand. But it is passages like this that remind me there is always a light at the end of whatever dark tunnel I go through. And I think that forgiveness is an essential part of this process – forgiving others for wronging you, being forgiven for the pain you have caused others, forgiving yourself for what you perceive to be your failures, and being forgiven for letting fear (of others, of death, of judgement) dominate your life.

These acts of forgiveness ‘prune’ from me those parts of my life that impede my finding fulfillment and peace in life, in being reconciled with God. I may find them painful, I may feel abandoned at times as I travel along this path, I may be fearful of the future, but I know God’s love surrounds me, made possible by God’s gracious forgiveness.

For me, then, I understand these passages to be about my relationship with God, not about God’s judgement and punishment of them, of others. And so, like the author of Psalm 22, in both the dark times and the good times I can rejoice in the forgiveness of God and know that God, the good Gardener, is with me forever.

I can show you the most excellent way, says Paul. The path of love, where there is no place for fear or self-righteousness, where that love is fuelled by God, who first loved us. May we let that love course through our whole bodies, and give us life.

**AMEN**