

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

6 May 2012, Easter 5

Rev. Anneke Oppewal,

John 15: 1-7

“Allowing for growth”



Whenever this text about the vine comes up in the lectionary my thoughts go back to my first congregation. It was located in the middle of an area full of orchards. Every year tons of what were predominantly apples, pears and some prunes and apricots found their way from there to national and international markets. And my Church was full of experienced orchardists who knew how to best grow these fruits and tend the trees.

Once, with this passage on the lectionary I invited one of them, to come and talk to us. He brought a small tree that was going to be planted the next week into the Church and he explained how he was going to help it grow. It was an experience I will never forget.

A couple of things he shared with us on that morning I'd like to share with you now.

First of all: He told us fruit will only grow on branches that have been grafted onto a stem or trunk of a different variety of tree. The stem is good at growing and feeding, but cannot bear fruit unless branches are grafted onto it which can then grow, branch out and bear fruit. It is not the stem that branches out, it is the branches grafted onto the stem that branch out and bear fruit.

To me that is a beautiful image of how the image of the Vine Jesus uses as image of the Church works. The stem, Jesus, is different from the branches. It does the feeding, it is needed as a stem for the branches to be grafted on. But it needs the branches to grow fruit, and branch out. The stem can do nothing and will remain fruitless without branches being grafted onto it.

Pruning is that part of the caring for the tree that involves taking away superfluous bits, branches that don't grow fruit, or that get in the way of other branches growing fruit. Pruning is essential to both the branches and the stem: By pruning the tree the fruit grower will make sure sunlight and air get to every part of the tree and open it up. In this way the bees will find it easier to get to the flowers and pollinate them, the sun will find it easier to generate the physiological processes needed for the leaves to grow to provide shade for the fruit and collect rainwater, and to make sure the sun reaches the young fruit with its warmth so it can grow into nice, juicy and attractive specimens. It will prevent mould from forming and "wild wood" from growing and smothering the tree. "Wild Wood" being all those shoots that grow in the wrong direction for them to be able to form or carry fruit.

Pruning then is the art of knowing how to take as little as possible off to maximise the growth, helping the tree reach its full potential. With branches that grow sideways and slightly up, so they maximise exposure to sunlight and are not too long and floppy to need propping up once they become heavy with fruit.

A fruit grower needs to be able to anticipate how the tree will grow and where it needs tweaking or lifting for air, sunlight, rain and nutrients to be able to do their thing. And over time this experienced fruit grower told me, he will know his trees and build a relationship

with them and know what they need and how to guide them to help them produce a good crop year, after year, after year.

Another thing I learned from him: fruit bearing is not necessarily a sign a tree is healthy. Dying trees will try to get as much seed out as they possibly can before their end comes. And that's why the sickest and oldest trees are sometimes seen to produce the most fruit, even where their trunks are already rotting inside.

I think these insights can be helpful interpreting Jesus' use of the image of the Vine in a couple of ways:

Pruning is not a negative activity. Pruning is about optimising growth, opening up a tree for it to be able to breathe and let the light in where it is needed. It is about guidance and guiding and about making sure that the tree will be able to support the fruit that's produced. Branches need to be lifted and bent to help them be in the best position for them to be productive. AND this is a process that keeps repeating year after year, with tree and fruit grower becoming more and more intimate over time.

If we think of Church life: Although most of us don't like change, cutting and pruning is necessary for growth. For air and light to reach into the core of the tree and keep mould and wild wood from obscuring the light and smothering the young fruit that may be forming. Wild wood needs to be taken away, because although it may look nice and green it doesn't bear fruit, and obscures the core of what we are on about: bearing fruit.

Change is inevitable for growth, if the orchardist is any good at what he does, he will be amongst the trees all the time, tweaking the branches, adjusting and guiding them to optimise their chance of coming to their full potential. Making sure nothing gets in the way of a good apple or pear. If the tree is dying he will wait until it has given that last blast of fruit before he cuts it down, with pain in his heart, for it was a good tree, giving much fruit in its day, but now has to make room for a younger plant that will take its place.

Change is inevitable for us if we want to grow and bear fruit, and should it happen that a particular tree is ready to die after bearing much fruit we should trust the orchardist will plant another tree in its place to continue the production of worthwhile fruit. Feeling the love of the fruit grower as he grieves the loss of a tree that has given so much over the course of its life but has now come to a point where it can give no more.

I think, the way we are now, as North Balwyn Uniting Church, we are a traumatised tree that has suffered a lot. The closure of one of our Churches, the drastic changes most of us have lived through in the last decades, the aging of our congregation, the lack of interest from younger generations..... I think we need to be realistic enough to accept that we are an old tree that may not have the capacity to recover from the trauma of closure and a continuing decline in numbers. It may be that all we are called to do now is spread out as many of our seeds as we can still manage. And that may not only apply to us here in North Balwyn, we know it applies to the Church in the whole Westernised world right now. The world around our part of the Church has changed, the soil has changed, the very air we breathe has changed and it is not clear if the tree we are, the Church we are, can adjust to all these changes or if it is time for it to make room for something different.

At the same time: There may be life for us yet, and perhaps, after another radical pruning session this tree may be opened up so effectively that it will burst with new life in no time. We don't know. We will have to leave that to the orchardist.

And that made me think of something else:

When we were living in England we were close to Hampton Court, one of the old palaces of Henry the Eighth. We visited there regularly. They had lovely gardens, a maze, a weapons room and a functioning medieval kitchen. And they had “the great Vine”, over 240 years old, and the oldest living vine in the world, planted in 1769 by Lancelot, ‘Capability’, Brown.

In 1887, about a hundred years after planting, it was already 1.2 metres around the base, and it is now 4 metres around the base and the longest rod is 36.5 metres. The average crop is about 272 kilograms, and in 2001 it produced the best crop ever with 383 kilograms. (We were there! We saw them! And it was an awesome sight....). How far the roots extend nobody knows, but it is certain that they extend further than the 36.5 meters of the longest branch above ground.

This vine has survived due to the diligent and loving care of many successive vine growers. It has been pruned by experts many times to maximise its yield and minimise the chances of disease or bugs getting to it. If there is any Vine that reflects the image of the Church Jesus refers to coming into being after his death, it must be this one. And apart from its enormous resilience and capacity to grow and continue to bear fruit, it may remind us that North Balwyn Uniting Church, or even the Uniting Church in Australia, or even the Reformed tradition, is, in the scheme of things, only one branching of many, many others, both older and younger that have been grafted onto that one stem that has been around for a very long time and continues to feed and nurture all these branches, supported by an extensive root system that extends further and deeper than we can even imagine.

The stem on which we are grafted itself taking its nutrients from a history and tradition that goes back thousands of years with a multitude of religions, cultures and philosophies feeding into it. Jesus did not just “happen” over night. We didn’t just “happen” over night. We are part of a long and complex history, of a very old vine with roots reaching back to time (literally) immemorial, feeding into a stem that has grown with time into something that may only vaguely represent the young rabbi that walked the earth around two thousand years ago, but that feeds many, many branches worldwide, old and young, strong and faltering. We are part of a living reality that lives and is fed and guided by a love and care that seeks to feed the world with the fruit it produces: Justice, peace, wholeness, reconciliation, love.

As we gather around the table we may feel the wine grower prowl around the sanctuary as we seek to connect or reconnect to that reality to see where we need a nudge, where we need to be lifted or trained, or perhaps need a bit of a cut back here and there, watching this particular tree with a loving, but at the same time assessing eye that is trying to figure out what the best way forward for this particular part of the vine may be.

If we look at it that way there is nothing to fear from a bit of pruning. It is something to look forward to with anticipation leaving it to the orchardist, in trust, to do what is necessary to create new growth, to train us, to prune us, to guide us, to feed us to help us to reach our potential. That may take growing into a different direction, but knowing ourselves always to be under the loving and discerning eye of the wine grower, and for as long as we stay connected, fed by the juices of the stem and the extensive root system that supports the magnificent vine we are part of. Amen.

For information on the Great Vine see:

<http://www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/stories/palacehighlight/TheGreatVine>