

Church of the Resurrection  
Easter 5  
28 April 24

John 15.1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. **2** He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes[a] to make it bear more fruit. **3** You have already been cleansed[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. **4** Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. **5** I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. **6** Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become[c] my disciples.

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Almost never do I watch films when they are current. Only 2 weeks ago I finally watched the 2022 film 'Avatar the Way of Water'. The two Avatar films do a beautiful job of what is called world-building: they are an imaginative creation of another society and culture, on a planet called Pandora, which has an entirely different but human-like species called the Navi.

The beautiful feature of the planet Pandora is the living connection of all things, and the reverence the Navi have for all things. Their connection is physical as well as spiritual. Because the Navi have tails. The tip of their tail is a highly sensitive touch organ which can connect with a similar organ in plants and animals. The director of the film is saying, wouldn't our humanity be enriched if we were more sensitive to all the living beings and things around us. It reminded me of Aboriginal spirituality, as we learnt about in the Lent groups.

Why do I share about this movie? When Jesus says he is the vine, he is world-building, telling us of the connection of all things. He calls it the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of Heaven. The possibility exists already, through him, to access this connection; and we don't need to have tails.

Jesus' life-force that he imparts to everything is best described through a living, organic plant. As the vine he nourishes us, giving meaning and purpose to all life.

Where did Jesus find his metaphors? God's knowledge is of course perfect. But he grew up as we do, and in his perfect humanity; he listened and observed as well as taught. He read the created world of nature and allowed it to speak to him.

Our culture's disconnect from our earthiness has led to many of our problems. What would happen if we spent more time reading the world around us? We might become more connected to it and strive to heal its wounds.

If I was to try and illustrate what Jesus is saying about himself with another word picture, I think I would still come back to something organic. Divine attributes are revealed in some very common things. Such as a grape vine. They have been called a continuous

sacrament. Aboriginal spirituality finds this same truth in their perception of country, a gift of the Creator.

The challenge in Jesus' image is his addition of strong descriptive language. He uses the language of transformation.

Cutting, pruning, being thrown into the fire: some of Jesus' language around his world-building. Using hyperbole, he expresses his longing that we to be in him. Separated from him, he warns we become useless, like the branches we put in our wheelie bins.

Does a person have to be attached to the vine to be saved? Aren't there lots of good people who are not connected to his vine? People who are not withered and useless? People who even outshine us in good works? People who give their lives in the service of others? That's what the nation was saying in the ANZAC services around the country this past week. Maybe the vine is more extensive than we had thought. As I read in a blog recently, 'the boundaries of the Christian community ... are always a bit fuzzy.'

Jesus' idea of relationship is more than what we can see. It is both in time and outside of time, if we can even conceive of such a thing. It is more immediate than anything we can connect to with social media. He desires that we imagine ourselves like a branch connected to its vine. And to live that reality.

Not all separation from the vine is bad. Pruning is good. Even though pruned bushes are not always pretty. Sometimes a pruned bush looks so damaged that it's hard to believe it will ever bear fruit or flower again. Have you ever experienced extreme pruning? Sometimes cutting away the dead bits is the only way for new life to take place.

Being a disciple of Jesus does not spare us. The question is not whether we will be pruned, having our rough edges removed. The question is: how will we respond when we are pruned? Will we grow, or will we wither? And the answer is related, it seems, to whether we are abiding.

Abiding is an old-fashioned word. Depending on context, it can have a very negative meaning: to put up with or not tolerate. It can also mean remaining in a place, dwelling or staying. In the OT, the people of Israel were very poor at abiding, staying with God. God found them to be fickle, unfaithful. But Israel discovered that in spite of their own waywardness, God was faithful in abiding with them.

Everything earthly and human is changeable and temporary. From the moment we are born, we are at the mercy of constant change. Only God is unchanging. Jesus' earthly existence was only for a short time; but now he is eternally present. Because God abides.

Remaining with Jesus was a life or death issue when he taught about abiding. It was at his last meal with his disciples. He knew where he was going and what would happen. He knew he was going to be taken away from his friends and be killed. Yet amazingly, he could say to them to remain with him, to stay joined to him. He wanted them to know that they could actually continue to be a part of him, through his death and into new life. And that he would reciprocate in abiding with them in all the vicissitudes of their lives.

I visited a clergy friend in residential care not too long ago. I had been privileged to experience his and his wife's gift of hospitality. As he lay there close to death, I wanted

him to remember what he believed and had faithfully taught. So I read him these verses about the vine and Jesus abiding.

This is the eternal connection that Jesus offers. It is a world of difference from mere digital connection. It is the gift to us of enduring relationship. Every time we come together as church, we reinforce the nourishment of the vine. We receive a takeaway grace to share our connection with others.

Being in genuine relationship and real community, while it can be life-giving, isn't always easy, as Jesus' strong language suggests. Relationships have ups and downs and require give and take. We have to be vulnerable in relationships if they are going to really work for us. If we are being open and honest, others are going to know our true selves. That means we can never completely protect ourselves from being hurt. Communities are made of real people. All of us have our off days. And being in community means dealing with that. It means cultivating forgiveness. Maybe it's is the mulch around the base of the vine.

Abiding in Jesus is sharing in his risen life, to know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Through him we receive the grace of the ever present vine.

And we do our best to abide, as Jesus abides in us for eternity.

Excerpts from David Whyte's poem, *The Sun*, as quoted in Daily Meditation, Richard Rohr, 26.4.24:

... I want to walk  
through life  
amazed and inarticulate  
with thanks....

I want to know  
when I lean down to the lilies  
by the water  
and feel their small and  
perfect reflection  
on my face....

I want to know  
what I am  
and what I am  
involved with by loving  
this world  
as I do....

I want to be found by love,  
... I want to come alive  
in the holiness  
of that belonging.

May the risen Christ grant us the joys of eternal life. Amen.