

Sermon 29 April 2018 - Cookbury

Anyone who has seen my attempts at gardening will know that it is not one of my talents. I'm OK when it comes to the more menial tasks, like clearing the brambles in the field behind our house; but I do not have green fingers.

My mum, on the other hand, was a gifted gardener. Everything she planted seemed to just put down roots and grow. She seemed to know instinctively what should go where, and how to keep everything looking its best. When it came to pruning the roses, she was severe. It became a family joke – every year, we would be amazed at how far she would cut them back. Every year, we were sure that this time, she had gone too far – that the roses would never recover. But every year, as the weeks and months passed, the new growth would appear, and the roses would bloom better than ever.

And while both activities involve cutting, there's a world of difference between what I do with the brambles – cutting them back indiscriminately in the hope that they never return; and mum's pruning of the roses, which was done carefully, lovingly, so that the new shoots had room to breathe and grow, and the plants could flourish.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus uses the analogy of the grapevine. Jesus himself is the true vine; we, his people are the branches; and God is the gardener. And as we know from his many parables, Jesus often uses everyday items or situations to deliver his message.

Vineyards would have been a common sight in Palestine, and in the Old Testament, Israel was often referred to as the vine that God had planted in the promised land. For example, in Psalm 80, we read:

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it,

and it took root and filled the land.

Just like a rose bush, a grape vine that is left untended will become straggly and tangled; it will grow in on itself. New shoots will have to fight to reach the light, and much of the plant's energy is wasted. And as a result, the quality and quantity of the grapes produced will suffer. But with careful pruning, the surplus growth that is getting in the way of the new shoots is removed, allowing those shoots to grow towards the light, to flourish, and be fruitful.

In this analogy, Jesus is telling us that, just like the shoots and branches on a grapevine, we can only truly live if we remain connected to him. That our lives can become choked with side shoots and dead wood that sap our energy and prevent us from yielding good fruit. And that if we truly want to be the people that God intended us to be, then we have to submit to being 'pruned' by him.

But what does it mean, to be pruned by God? These days, there are so many things that can choke up our lives and get in the way of our relationship with God. Being too hung up on material things. Being over-committed to our work, or our hobbies. Being drawn in to the negativity of the media. Anything that so fills up our lives, that we no longer have time or space for God. Or like side-shoots growing in the wrong direction, having goals or aspirations that are incompatible with God's plans.

We need to let God cut away those parts of our lives that are preventing us from being fruitful for him – both as individuals, and as the church. That can be a painful experience. And as with the rose bush or a grape vine, it's not something that happens just once – it needs to be repeated at regular intervals.

But we need to remember, that if we do try to go our own way; to think that we can live our lives without reference to God, then like branches that are not grafted into the vine, we will wither and die. As Jesus warns us,

“Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned.”

That's not a threat from a vengeful God – merely a warning from a God who loves us of the inevitable consequences of being separated from him.

In our reading from Acts, we have a good example of what can happen when God acts to cut away the things that prevent his people from being fruitful. The Ethiopian eunuch had been to Jerusalem, to worship at the temple. In those days, this would have been a considerable journey, and yet when the eunuch got there, he would have faced many barriers. As a gentile, he would have been barred from the inner courts of the temple. Furthermore, as a eunuch, his physical disfigurement would have rendered him ritually unacceptable to the Jews. Despite his desire to worship God, he would have been kept at a distance.

And yet, the eunuch was so captivated by the God of Israel that as he returned home, he was reading the book of Isaiah – and struggling to understand it. And then God steps in.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Philip comes alongside the eunuch and explains the scriptures to him, showing him how Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah. And in an instant, the religious and social taboos and intellectual barriers that had excluded the Ethiopian were removed – and he is embraced by the loving God who is revealed in Jesus. Legend has it that the eunuch went home and became the founder of the Ethiopian church, which exists to this day – a new branch grafted onto the vine, which went on to produce much fruit.

I was talking to Geoff at Saturday Church a couple of weeks ago. As many of you will know, one of Geoff's interests is hedge-laying, and he had recently taken part in a regional hedge-laying competition in Somerset.

What I hadn't appreciated is that hedge-laying competitions take various forms. It's not all about how good the newly-laid hedge looks on the day. There is also the 're-growth' competition, where hedges laid in the previous year are re-visited, and the judges assess the quality of the hedge after a year of new growth has occurred.

Now, Geoff tells me that there are some unscrupulous competitors who try to improve the immediate appearance of their hedges, by weaving dead branches back into the hedge to improve its line, and use chainsaws rather than hand tools speed up their work. This may help in the short term, but after a year has passed, these short-cuts begin to show through.

And it got me thinking – perhaps there's a modern-day parable here: about the kingdom of heaven being likened to a hedge. And about the farmer who asks his labourers to re-lay that hedge. And there are wicked labourers, and good labourers – I'll leave you to fill in the rest. But the message of the parable is clear – it is how the hedge continues to grow, year after year, that is surely more important than how it looks immediately after it has been laid.

And I'm sure that Geoff won't mind me saying that, while he didn't win on the day, when the judges looked at the hedges laid in the previous year, Geoff's was the best, and he won the re-growth competition.

And so I wonder, what sort of hedges have we become? Are our lives tangled and full of dead wood, with shoots heading off in the wrong direction; or are we well pruned, strongly rooted in God, and with new shoots ready to grow towards the light, and be fruitful for him?

And what is that fruit? In a word, love. The love that John spoke of in our second reading this morning:

“God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect”.

Amen.

