

I am the true vine

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Easter 5b / Anzac Day – John 15 1-8

Today's Gospel passage happens to be the text that was chosen by Fr Francis Horner SSM when he preached at my deaconing here in this church in 1995. Francis was a self-confessed gardener, and he focused on the words about pruning – the Father removing any branches that don't bear fruit. Francis advised me to let it happen; focus on fewer things and let them bear plenty of fruit.

So since then, I've tried to focus on learning the original context of what I read in scripture. I find it very fruitful to learn what was going on around the people who lived back then. I find a story's context and the events around it help us get what it's really saying, and imagine our way into what it calls *us* to do in *our* context.

Jesus told his disciples, *I am the true vine – I am the vine, you are the branches*. We are *that* intimately connected to Jesus. But context? His *I am* statements often make a connection between Jesus and the Temple. Today's *I am* statement does this. It evokes the Temple's Golden Vine; a huge sculpture of a vine wreathed around the columns of the Temple porch. It recalled the prophets who often called Israel God's vineyard. Pilgrims coming to Jerusalem would bring offerings of solid gold leaves and grapes to add to the Golden Vine, adding to its splendour. *I am the true vine*. When Jesus says this, he's declaring that he embodies in a living form what the Golden Vine of the Temple represented in sculpture; he embodies God's people.

Sculpture is static, but living vines have a mind of their own. What their tendrils grab onto sets the direction of growth for the rest of the vine. But if they're going to

flourish and bear much fruit, they need attention. (Neglected Bulgarian

vineyards courtesy of the EU) So the true vine tended by the Father is the beautiful picture Jesus gives us of the bond between us and him, and through him, with God. As his branches, we abide in Jesus, and we're called to provide abundant fruit for the world he came to save.

Often when we think of an image for the Church, we think in terms of Paul's image of us as a body; the body of Christ. In that image, Christ is the head and we are the various members. It's a wonderful image. But in terms of what a local 21st-century church should be doing, today's image of us as a plant can be really helpful. It demands that we look at the connection between us and our context. Plants of the same species can be quite different from each other in different contexts. Each individual plant has to adapt to its own environment. And then wherever they are, through the fruit they bear, they do their job as providers of God's bounty.

Let's consider a plant that has a bit more to do with our church's European heritage; one called the Major Oak.

It's an ancient oak tree growing in Sherwood Forest. Over 800 years old, it first sprouted from its acorn in the time of King John. *(He reigned from 1199 – 1216)* The Major Oak is held up by beams which support its branches. Steel hawsers suspend other branches, and a metal band around the trunk makes sure it doesn't fall apart. It's magnificent; people revere this ancient beast. It's still producing acorns, and every year, its acorns are gathered up and planted in different countries around the world. The Adelaide Hills are full of its descendants. In every place they're planted, the acorns carry the DNA of the original tree. But the shape of each tree is different depending on local environmental conditions.

Peter Pillinger writes about the Major Oak as an image of church life. He's a Methodist from the UK. He refers to the

Major Oak to talk about a *mixed ecology church*. *Mixed ecology church* means that in every niche of our society, there needs to be a Christian presence which is the right plant to be growing there. It has to shape itself to bear fruit for the ecological niche that it's growing in. And just as every ecological niche on the planet is interlinked, so this expression *mixed ecology* speaks about the inter-connectedness of this diverse Christian Church.

So to us and our context. For 132 years, this *new* St John's building has stood here, originally dominating its surroundings, but over recent years, steadily dwarfed by developments around us. Until WWII, it was surrounded by majority Anglo-Celtic households. But with returning soldiers only able to get loans for new builds further out, our demographic changed. The Methodists just down the street had to close and we were also on the brink of closure by Don Wallace's time in the '70s. Like a vine or an oak or a gum tree, we relate to our context, or we wilt away.

So what does it mean for us to be pruned so we can bear much fruit? And what fruit are we talking about? Paul says the fruits of the Spirit are *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Gal 5 22-3
These are fruits that can nourish anyone, and they need to be the first things anyone would notice here. Is there anything hiding them in today's Church? What are the opposites of the fruits of the Spirit? *Indifference, bitterness, violent anger, intolerance, selfishness, wickedness, inconstancy, callousness and self-indulgence*? Because that's where the pruning will happen. In an era of epidemic loneliness, epidemic gender-based violence and the beating drums of war again, the fruits of the Spirit must be every church's focus. And that requires that we abide in Christ, that we accept being actively pruned and reshaped by God, and that we rejoice to see our fruit harvested and distributed. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*.

Are we ready? Amen