

I just feel as though in some ways the sermon is already increased this morning has been preached this morning – it's been preached by you because you've spoken, and you've spoken of the power of prayer and of the way that you've been spiritually fed through the prayer that you offer to God and the way that God responds to you in your need. But we are going to look at scripture together, and we're going to look at John 15:1-12. So let's look at scripture. Well known words of Jesus in the middle of this long discourse that Jesus gives in the gospel of John. So he says to his disciples – remember at this point the disciples are in the midst: they know something big is coming, they know trouble's on its way, they know the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities together are closing in, they know but things are not going to continue to be the way they've been, and then Jesus chooses to say to them at this stage:

[Reads John 15:1-12]

Before we look at the scripture together, Darren had a quick word with me a few moments ago and we need to pray for a child<sup>1</sup>...Lord God we commit this child of yours into your hands, and pray these prayers in your name, amen.

So we going to look at this scripture together, and as we do so we are thinking about this theme: the theme being prayer, well “The Power of Prayer”, and in particular the way that prayer feeds and strengthens us. The way that prayer feeds and strengthens us, and we have these amazing pictures that we are presented with, in this passage when Jesus is speaking to his disciples. In this time of real anxiety and fear that the disciples were feeling – I can't stress it enough: they knew something was happening, trouble was coming, and this was the moment that Jesus chose to say to them this picture: the picture of the vine.

I don't know about you but I love grapes. We have grapes in our kitchen quite a lot of time and I have to really behave myself so that the whole lot don't go in one day, because grapes are just such a fantastic thing. I don't know whether you've heard the story of the person who was given a bottle of wine – a minister was given a bottle of wine – and they said “Pastor I want you to have this bottle of wine, but I want you to acknowledge the fact that this wine was given to you by someone in the church and I want you to have it.” Now some people in his church weren't that happy with the pastor drinking alcohol, and so he said in the church bulletin, “I'd like to thank the person who gave the gift of fruit and the spirit in which it was given.”

But the vine is a symbol. It's a symbol of fruitfulness. In Numbers 13 when Moses sent twelve men into Canaan to spy out the land, they went into a lush valley. They went into this lush valley, and you know that the growth of the fruits and the vines – where we hear reference to pomegranates and other types of fruits. There was a lushness about it all. We're told that they cut off a single branch of a grapevine bearing one cluster of grapes, but it was so large that two of those spies had to hold the bunch of grapes on a pole between them because it was so heavy and so large. There's an idea, a picture, of God's fruitfulness in that situation.

It's also a picture of abundance: so not just fruitfulness but also the abundance of God, that God doesn't simply give us a miserly something (“Here have this, it will just do you”), God is a God of

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<sup>1</sup> It was decided to leave this partially in (there is a fade-cut at this point removing personal details inappropriate to put on the website) as the series is about the Power of Prayer and interrupting the sermon for prayer is totally appropriate.

abundance. God gives us wonderful things in our lives, God wants us to be blessed with goodness. Not necessarily financial abundance – I'm not into a “Prosperity Gospel”, but I do believe there are things that are more valuable than finances, that actually give us far more than having that super yacht or whatever it is, that is held up.

It's also picture, the vine, of Israel as the people of God. Often in the Old Testament the vine is used to represent Israel, but it's usually, the vine is usually, presented as Israel lacking in some way. And so often in the Old Testament God will say: “You are my vine and yet...”

in Jeremiah 2:21, for instance, you can see this picture of this rotting vine here with grapes on it that are rotting away. And in Jeremiah 2:21: “I had planted you, Israel, says the Lord, like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt wild vine?”

We have this picture of the vine. We also have a picture in the scriptures, in this passage, of the branches. So we are therefore called to be branches, and what does that mean for us? Well it means that we are called to be connected, connected into the Vine.

“No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” This is a simple illustration from nature. No doubt, you know, the disciples understood it and it's simple enough for any of us to understand: if you cut a branch away from the vine it will die. Connection; feeding.

It's also a picture of dependence. In the second half of verse 4 we read “...apart from me you can do...” not very little, not the best you can, “...you can do nothing.” And that's a real challenge to us, isn't it? I think it was Tony Campolo, one of my favourite preachers down to the years now – he's now in his mid-80s, Tony. But I think Tony, who is a Christian sociologist and also a public speaker, and he said something like this: “So many of us Christians in the West have made our own selfish choices about our lives and how to live our lives, and then we try to forge God's signature on the bottom and say this is what God wants. But is it truly, or have we simply, put God's signature on to our own choices about how to live.”

How do we as branches seek to be connected, seek to be dependant? And seek to be humble? This idea of God saying to us “Apart from me you can do nothing;” it keeps of humble. We realise that if we can do nothing without him, the only way to achieve anything of value is to do it in the strength of God not in our strength.

I read a story many years ago about a man, an old man, who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. And this man had been hired by the village council of this village to clear away the debris from the pools of water that collected up in the mountain crevices, because those mountain crevices fed the water through into the streams, and those streams flowed down into a river that then flowed into the village. With silent faithful regularity this man patrolled this area knowing just where the blockages would occur, where the leaves and branches would gather, and he would go and clear away the rubbish and the silt that would otherwise choke and contaminate the fresh flow of water.

Of course, the village became a popular attraction because of this beautiful clear pure water. Swans came and floated along the crystal stream and river, picnickers gathered in this Austrian village, and the view of the water from the local shops and cafés was picturesque beyond description. Years passed as the village prospered. One evening the village Council met for its annual meeting and they reviewed the budget. And they noticed a small amount was being paid to some keeper of the spring. And the treasurer (treasurers can be good but this one was a

troublesome one), the treasurer of the council said “Who is this keeper of the spring that we're paying this money to? Why do we keep him on the payroll year after year? Do we actually need him? What does he actually do, this keeper of the spring? Have any of us even seen this man? For all we know he's simply taking our money and doing absolutely nothing with it! In my opinion this person is no longer necessary. I vote to remove the pay that we give him.” Everyone agreed with the treasurer and the council voted to dismiss this man, or to no longer pay his salary.

For several months, nothing much changed: the village went on with its business as usual. But by the autumn, high up in the mountains, the trees began to shed their leaves, small branches broke off and fell into the crevices and pools that fed into the stream. And they started to hinder the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish tinge in the water of the stream. A couple of days later, the water was darker. With another week or so, a slimy film had started to cover sections of the water along the banks, and soon a smell <sniff-sniff> started to emerge from the water.

Swans went and found somewhere else to swim, and the tourists went to other villages that were more pretty and didn't have that odour. The economy of the village was in serious peril. Likewise was the health of the villagers themselves because some of them were getting sick from drinking water that wasn't clean.

An emergency meeting of the village Council was held. After much discussion they realised what the money had been for that they'd been paying the keeper of the spring. And they quickly hired him back. Thankfully he came back.

Within a few weeks after he had started his work, the spring was cleansed and the water was once again living, fresh, bright. The vitality of that village had been restored because someone realised that something that was secret and hidden was so important to happen.

How do we make sure that we do the faithful, secret, regular work attending to our spring, the spring that wells up within us: that hidden place of connection with the Lord in our prayer and devotion?

When we don't do it, it may not show for a while. But at some point it will become clear. It will become clear, perhaps, as we neglect that secret work of God in our lives. It will build up and become a problem, unless we become the keeper of our own spring.

So we've looked at this picture of the vine, and of the branches. I want to think for a moment or two about the pruning. The pruning.

The word in Greek for “prune” also means to clean or to cleanse. So, this is a removal of that which is unnecessary, that which is not fruitful, that which is exactly drawing away from that which is fruitful. And it's a cleansing, a renewal.

So, we will experience the pruning as undoubtedly painful. Of course, verse 2: the first part of verse 2 says “The father cuts off every branch in Christ that bears no fruit.” Cuts off! Cutting is never comfortable.

Have any of us ever had a serious cut or an operation? We know it's painful. We did a First Aid course yesterday and some of the pictures the trainer showed us of cuts, and bruises, and burns, and all sorts of things like that – I went home to Sandra and said “Goodness me, what an afternoon, a day, we've had of looking at all these different types of injuries that people could have, and I might be the only First Aider there, and I've got to deal with them all!” But any of us

know that a cut, or an operation, is a serious thing. We need to be properly cared for, particularly in the aftermath of an operation.

The father cuts off every branch that is lacking in fruit. It's painful. It's inevitable. If we want to continue to grow and develop and become more fruitful, this has to happen. There's no other way: God doesn't say "I'll tell you what, I won't do it off: I'll just...you can direct your efforts away from it and we'll let it stay." No! it has to be cut off if the fruit is to come. It's inevitable, but it's ultimately positive. It's ultimately positive!

It may be painful, especially to our ego and our pride, for this cutting away of the fruitless branch. It may be painful, in particular to our ego, our pride, our desire to be able to be in control, our desire to feel that our efforts have meant something. But the ultimate goal is greater intimacy with the Father through Jesus Christ. Paul expresses this in this idea that he uses many times in his letters; this idea of being in Christ, grafted into Christ.

So the pruning.

Finally the harvesting.

What will the harvesting look like? Well, in verse 7 we're told that our will needs to align with God's. This harvesting: if we allowed the cutting and the pruning and the cleaning to happen, our will will be aligned with God's will. "If you remain in me and my words, my truth, my character, my life remains in you, then ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you."

I think some Christians have read this verse as though they are kids in a sweet shop: "What? Any of them? Any of the sweets? I can ask for any of them and I can have any, even that big gobstopper on the top?" It's about our will aligning with God's, and then as we choose to align ourselves with him then what we ask won't be for our selfish gain and selfish desire, it will be in line with God's glory and God's purpose. It's a mutual remaining isn't it? If we remain in him, and he and his words remain in us, then what we ask for will be in line with the will, the purpose and the character of the one whom we remain in.

The harvesting will also involve God's joy in us in all situations. And this joy is not about how well things are going, it's not about whether things are good in our lives, it's actually a deeper joy that is about the fact that whatever happens in life - like Paul says "Whether I am in plenty, or in want, I know that I belong to Christ."

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

The harvesting will also involve sacrificial love between believers and that love shown to the world. Verse 12 says "My commandment is this: love each other as I have loved you." That's perhaps the most astounding verse in this passage: love each other - the biggest challenge for us - to love each other as Christ has loved us. I don't know about you, but you don't have to necessarily like everybody in church to love them. We don't have to like everybody, each other, to love us in Christ. Actually the reality is that we seek to overcome those differences of character, differences of perspective, differences of viewpoint - we Overcome those things because unity in Christ matters to us more than me getting my will, or getting my points, or being heard and been known to be right - our unity matters more than that.

And that's a growing point for all of us: our unity in Christ matters more than any one of us feeling we've proven we were in the right. And you know in church life there will be times when there are disagreements, and in those times, as I've had in churches I've been the pastor at, I say to folk:

"What matters more than one how we deal with this issue, the bigger issue is: are we prepared to be united despite our differences?" Are we prepared to say "Yes, I disagree with such and such – this person?" Even this response that's been made to this situation, but our unity in Christ matters more than me getting my way.

Sacrificial love between believers. "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you." We can't do this Christian living on our own, we need each other with a body. To take Paul's analogy: if, you know, the foot says "I'm not an eye and therefore I'm not part of the whole", a foot on its own is not going to be able to do all that the body needs to do. We need each other. Ultimately the harvesting will involve the Father being glorified. The Father being glorified. This is the ultimate aim and purpose for all of human history that God should be given his rightful place as the Creator, the Sustainer, the Redeemer, and the Healer of all things.

I want to just finished by reflecting on the time of testimony we shared a little bit earlier, because as people were sharing testimonies it occurred to me that people without faith could look at every one of those stories and say "Yeah, well actually it was the doctors that did a great job." Or "It was the toothache: it went because that's what happens with toothaches sometimes." And all of the different examples: Anna being able to get to that stage of having the transplant at the stage she did; people without faith would say: in the end these things came together and they did so through human achievement. But we choose to see through the eyes of faith, and we recognise that God's hand is at work in secret ways that the world would reject, and that the world would say: "No, we have done these things; look at our achievements." But we say: "No, look at the glory of God shown in the lives of ordinary people like you and me."

God's glory is shown through the ways in which he touches our lives and helps us to recognise that his truth and his love permeates every aspect of our lives. We're not perfect. We're not perfect and we never will be perfect until that day when we meet Christ face to face. We continue to live in a world that is fallen, a world that is far from God's ideal, yet we can still see glimpses of the glory of God, of his Kingdom lived out in our lives and our experiences. And to those things we cling: we choose to give meaning to them because we believe God is at work in our lives and in our world.

Amen.